

The Doubling Rod



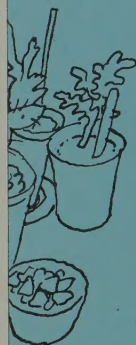
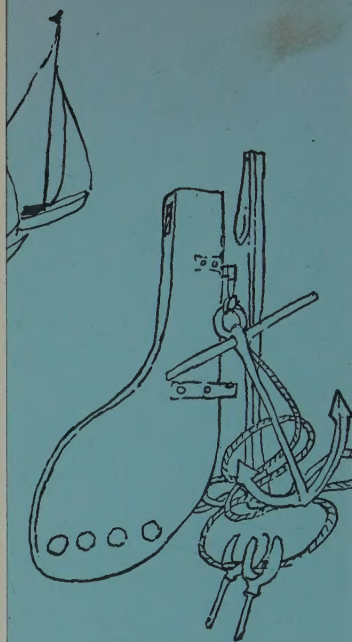
Ada Harrison

ILLUSTRATED BY ROBERT AUSTIN

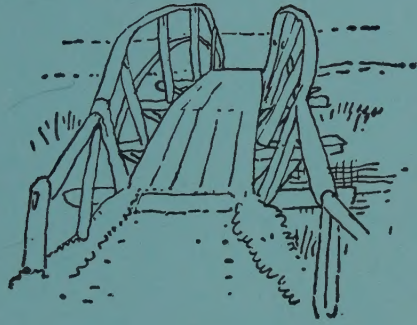
The Hinnabels – Jane, Francis, and their parents – are a lively, unconventional family who live near London, by the river, next door to a sedate, conventional family. Two things plunge the Hinnabels (and incidentally their neighbours) into a strange adventure; one is a double-forked yew branch which Mr Hinnabel finds during a country walk; the other, a small Etruscan bronze statue which he brings home to clean before placing it in the museum where he works. The yew branch, or ‘doubling rod’, has powerful uncanny properties which Jane discovers accidentally one day; and when the bronze is stolen from her father’s study, it is with the aid of the doubling rod that the thief is finally tracked down – but not before the Hinnabels have become involved in an exciting and breathless chase on strange ground, on the track of a strange quarry.

‘An extremely charming and whimsical tale of magic.’
The Librarian

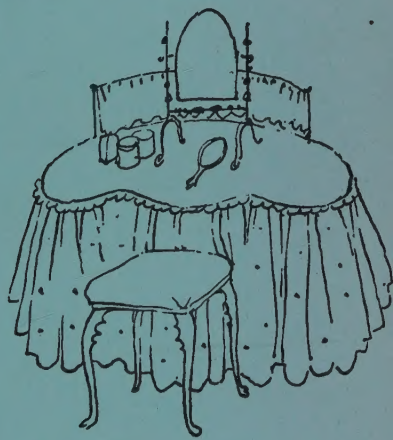
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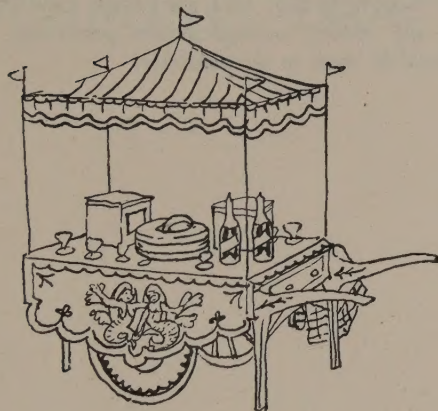


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By ADA HARRISON

Illustrated by
ROBERT AUSTIN



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*The
Doubling Rod*

Chapter One

‘IF ONE could have a magic tool,’ said Mrs Hinnabel musingly at high tea, ‘I wonder what would be the best kind of thing to have.’

‘A tool,’ said Jane instantly, waving her spoon over the cracked shell, ‘for turning this into another egg.’

‘Poor soul,’ said Mrs Hinnabel, though Jane really did not go hungry.

She added, ‘I remember the first time I ever had two boiled eggs.’

‘When was it?’

‘It was in a hotel, in Africa. An Indian waiter brought them.’

‘How old were you?’

‘Seven.’

‘Seven! Could you eat them?’

‘It was after a journey. They were actually just a shade too much.’

‘I could eat six,’ Jane declared. She was eleven, and tall for her age.

She waved her hand over the chipped shell again.

‘Iggly, piggly, stinky, wink,
The white to eat and the yolk to drink.’

The egg stayed as it was. ‘Pass the bread and butter then,’ she requested.



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'A doubling-rod,' said Mr Hinnabel, speaking for the first time.

Mr Hinnabel, as a father, was something on his own. He was not the kind of father who spoke down to children or up to children. Nor did he speak to them or treat them, as parents sometimes boasted, exactly as if they were grown-ups. He spoke when he had something to say, and children or anyone might hear him say it. He did not actually speak very much, except on certain occasions, when it seemed as though he might go on for ever. His family put up with this habit, as they understood him, but without giving him any encouragement. Mr Hinnabel was a professor, though he used the title as little as possible. He was not a professor of science. He did not care about science. He was a professor of ancient things and peoples, and because his work was very important to him it played a large part in his family's lives. He looked, at first glance, rather old to be Jane's father and the husband of Mrs Hinnabel, but this was because he had a small beard. One saw immediately after this that he had brilliantly blue eyes, far bluer than other people's. Jane had them too. Jane had one brother, Francis, who was thirteen. On Saturdays the family had high-tea.

Mr Hinnabel said now, 'A doubling-rod.'

Jane looked up interrogatively.

'Isn't that what you mean?'

She thought it over. 'Yes. I suppose it is. It might be rather fun.'

'Really having your cake and eating it,' said Mrs Hinnabel.

'Yes,' said Francis, 'only it might be made to work both ways, double nasty things as well as double nice things.'

'Everything always works both ways,' Mrs Hinnabel said.

They went on with their high-tea.

About a fortnight after the conversation of the unchangeable egg, Jane and her father were taking the dog for a walk. It was an evening of early spring, very damp and full of birdsong, and full, also, of good smells for humans and dogs. They had come from a field-path on to the road and were walking for a little way round the wall of a park. Suddenly Mr Hinnabel stopped and looked up into the branches on the inner side of the wall.

'I think that might be it,' he said.

'What?' Jane asked, thinking his mind might be running upon birds' nests, as it often did.

'The fourth, no, the one, two, three—the fifth and sixth branches,' said Mr Hinnabel, still looking up.

'What *are* you talking about?' Jane asked him.

Mr Hinnabel bent his blue eyes down to her.

'The doubling-rod,' he said, as though for the last fortnight they had talked of nothing else.

Jane looked upwards, though she did not understand why.

'Look,' said her father. 'The branch of that yew. You see the shoots springing up absolutely straight out of it? The fifth and sixth are quite perfect. They're exactly parallel.'

Following his hand Jane saw what she had never noticed before, the shoots of the yew, springing straight up out of the main branch all the way down its length, like candles.

'They *are* straight,' she agreed.

'Of course, the yew,' Mr Hinnabel was murmuring to himself. 'Ancient and sacred, naturally. . . .'

'But how do we *get* it?' asked Jane a little irritably,

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fearing that he was about to go off on one of his flights, and peering up at the eight feet of smooth brick wall.

‘Get it?’ murmured Mr Hinnabel vaguely, as though such a thing had hardly occurred to him.

He turned back suddenly to the field-path out of which they had come and whistled sharply to the dog. ‘Come on, Pete!’

‘There he is,’ said Jane impatiently, pointing to their terrier gazing back at them inquiringly from thirty yards ahead on the road.

‘Oh yes, he wants to get back to his dinner,’ said Mr Hinnabel. ‘Poor chap. Let’s get on.’

He started up the road with long strides, and Jane had to work hard to keep up with him.

‘Are we late?’ he asked Mrs Hinnabel, beginning to go to the kitchen to fetch Pete’s dish.

‘Not more than usual,’ said his wife, surprised at this display of thoughtfulness. ‘Hurry up and wash your hands, Jane.’

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Next night, as Jane was going to bed, she heard her father call softly from his study, ‘Jane!’

She went in.

‘Here it is,’ he said.

Mr Hinnabel was carefully peeling off the last faint sliver of bark from the stick (but it was not exactly a stick) in his hand. Then he held it up for Jane to see. It was two perfectly parallel tapering sticks held together by a bar at the top, like a two-pronged fork, without any handle. The bar across the top was the main branch from which the shoots had grown. It was like a croquet hoop, only longer, and no wider at the bottom than at the top. Mr

Hinnabel offered it to her, white and perfectly peeled. Jane took it from him, holding it by the cross-piece, and tried the points of it against her palm.

'Isn't it *lovely*!' she cried.

It was hard to say why it was lovely, but it was. It was so white, and so exactly even.

'How perfectly you've peeled it,' she said.

'I think perhaps it ought to dry a bit,' he answered. He laid it on the table, and going over to a chest under one of the windows, he took out a hammer and two nails.

Among the valuable objects and good bits of furniture in Mr Hinnabel's study was a coarse old cupboard, where he kept paint, varnish, string, glue, and hundreds of other things. He knocked the nails into the side of this cupboard and hung the stick carefully on them.

Jane saw it bestowed and they smiled to each other.

'I expect you'd better go to bed,' her father said.

'But how did you get it?' Jane asked him.

'Get it?' said Mr Hinnabel vaguely, for the second time.

He pulled out the top drawer of his desk, by which he was standing, and took out a little terra-cotta object, which Jane knew had been some ancient child's doll.

'Would you like to take her to bed with you?' he suggested, 'the poor old girl ...'

Jane brushed her aside.

'How did you get it?' she repeated.

Mr Hinnabel put the poor old girl back in the drawer and shut her up again.

'Get it?' he echoed, this time with less vagueness. 'I've had to get more difficult things than that.' He bent down and kissed her. 'Look here, Mother'll be after us. Go on up.'

Going upstairs two hours later to fetch a book, this time

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Mr Hinnabel heard Jane calling *him*, through her half-open door.

‘Yes? What is it, Janey?’ he asked, going in surprised. ‘Aren’t you asleep?’

Jane was lying on her back with eyes very much awake. ‘How did you get it?’ she asked softly.

For a moment Mr Hinnabel stood at the window gazing out at the moon, which had risen just above the birch-tree at the far corner of the garden. Then he walked back to Jane and sat down on her bed.

‘I waited till the moon was up last night,’ he said, ‘about eleven, and then I did our walk over again. I looked back, when I was calling Pete, to see how far the place was from where the field-path runs into the road; so I found it easily enough. I found the tree quite easily too, and got the rod.’

‘How?’ asked Jane.

‘With my little pocket-saw,’ said Mr Hinnabel. ‘It’s very sharp.’

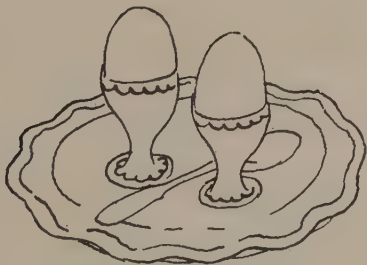
‘But how did you get up?’

He stood up and tucked the clothes round her.

‘Do you think me a cripple because I’ve got a beard?’ he demanded.

‘No,’ answered Jane. ‘Do you often get things like that?’

‘Only when we want them badly enough,’ Mr Hinnabel said.



Chapter Two

THE ROD hung on the cupboard, drying and shrinking, and Jane thought no more about it. It became one of the things in her father's study, like the coins and the ancient vases and the poor old girl. The spring wore on, and thoughts began to turn to out-of-doors. The Hinnabels lived in a square house in a large garden, the outlying parts of it overgrown and untidy, but pleasant. They had always kept ducks and chickens and a cat and a dog. They had, too, an ancient horse, to whom they had given a home in their paddock when he grew too old to work and who had thereupon decided to live for ever, an old car, and a shed full of old bicycles. They had also a large assortment of clothes, assembled or sent back by Mr Hinnabel in his travels, such as straw sandals from South America, Norwegian jerseys, and Italian soldiers' cloaks. They wore these things as the occasion demanded, so that there was often about them a slight accidental air of fancy dress. Jane from time to time grew dissatisfied with her surroundings.

'I wish we were smarter kind of people,' she once confided to her mother.

'So do I, Jane,' her mother surprised her very much by agreeing. 'But we have our points,' she added, 'and we must put up with ourselves as we are.'

On the first spring evening when it was light enough to be in the garden after tea, Jane stood on the path beside the house. She had just come out, having little homework, and was about to wander into the paddock to have word with old Toby, the horse. In the distance she could see her brother Francis whistling and plunging round the shrubbery, with Pete. They were rabbiting. No one except Francis had ever seen Pete catch a rabbit, and Jane never wished to see it, but she had no objection to the chase if it went on at a distance. As she set foot on the grass she was halted by sounds of urgency and excitement coming from the other side of the lawn.

‘Pete! Boy! Here! Catch him! Here!’ Francis was shouting.

In a second a rabbit shot out of the shrubbery, and in another second Pete shot after it. It was a baby; it ran diagonally across the lawn, the white blob of its tail rocketing up and down, the fear of death in its eyes. It ran with its whole soul, but Pete gained on it. It was a moment of agony. Jane heard her brother shout again. A scream rose in her own throat.

Above and behind her, her father stood at his window. He held the Rod in his hand and plunged it strongly towards Pete.

‘Now!’ he cried, in a great voice.

Whipping round to the scene again, Jane saw Pete almost on his prize. The rabbit, with its starting eyes, had all but reached the edge of the lawn. In two bounds Pete would be on it. Suddenly, beyond them, to the left, there was a flash . . . a white tail, a second one, vanished into the long grass ahead. For a split second Pete hesitated. The rabbit, with its last effort, shot into cover. Peter leaped into the grass behind it, then, with his back legs, braked



violently, changing direction. He had missed. With a great sob Jane burst into tears.

She realised that her father was standing on the path beside her. He was breathing hard and held her closely. She felt her heart beating hard against his arm. The Rod was still in his hand.

For a long time they both said nothing. Then at last Jane looked up at him and found him looking down.

'It works!'

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Mr Hinnabel kept his hand on Jane's shoulder as they walked back into the house. They entered his study in silence. The Rod was still in his hand. In silence he hung it up on the two nails and sat down at his desk. Jane sat on the edge of one of the great chairs by the fireplace and began to turn the pages of a book.

After a little while her father looked up and asked, 'Are you all right?'

'I'm all right,' Jane answered.

She settled back and turned to the pictures with more attention and began to be aware of the idols and strange carved objects that the book was about. Her father took up his pen. For the moment there was nothing to be said. They had seen something that had shaken them to the core; they knew something that nobody else knew. They shared more than a secret; they shared a marvel. They had no desire to fritter it away in words.

After a time Francis wandered in moodily with his hands in his pockets and the little dog at his heels.

'Pete missed the rabbit,' he said.

'Yes,' Mr Hinnabel softly agreed.

'I thought he'd got it.'

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Francis came farther into the room and gazed down distastefully at the litter on his father's desk.

'What are you doing?'

Mr Hinnabel added two words to what he was writing and carefully made a full-stop.

'Just some of my stuff.'

His son continued to gaze at the materials of his father's work with hostility. They seemed to him particularly useless. His own interest in life was machines. He would have liked to start an argument, but it was evident that there was no change to be got out of Mr Hinnabel tonight. With his hands still in his pockets he went slowly out of the room.

Jane suddenly shot bolt upright and asked her father a question.

'How did you know what to say?'

'With the Rod?'

'Yes.'

'What did I say?'

'You said "*Now!*" Don't you remember?'

'I remember it piercingly, but not what I said.'

'You'd suppose there'd be a special word.'

'I expect there isn't, actually. I expect it doesn't matter what you say or how you say it when it comes to the point. As long as you are *at* the point. As we were. It's strange how in moments of great feeling you don't seem responsible for your exact words and actions. It's as if you were being guided, or directed, or driven.'

Jane pondered on it a little longer. She asked at last, 'Shall we tell Francis?'

'As you like.'

She settled this, at least for the moment, by rising and saying in a motherly sort of manner, 'I suppose we'd better get ready for dinner.'

Her father looked at her with a gleam of anxiety when it came to bed-time, and for a moment she herself felt a touch of anxiety at the thought of being alone in the dark. But, oddly enough, the moment her head touched the pillow she was asleep.

In the end she did tell Francis. He did not believe her, as she had expected, not so much because he was a scoffer, but because it was too much out of his line.

'You mean to say I wave this thing over a piece of toffee and say "Abracadabra" and get two pieces?'

'You don't wave it, and there isn't any abracadabra.'

'What is there then?'

'It isn't like that.'

'Well, there must be something . . . some kind of password, some kind of switch that turns the thing on.'

'I tell you it isn't like that.'

'What is it like, then? What did father say?'

'He said, "Now!"' Jane answered slowly.

'Now?' echoed Francis incredulously. 'How silly!'

'It isn't silly,' said Jane passionately.

'Now look,' said Francis, seeing that he had upset her, 'I'm not being beastly about it. I really do want to understand it, if I can.'

'You saw Pete didn't get the rabbit?'

'Yes, I saw.'

'But he was bound to. He was on it.'

'Anything might have made him miss.'

'Father believes it. He had the Rod in his hand, and he believes it absolutely.'

'Did it tremble or something?'

'No, I don't think so. He didn't say.'

Francis was silent for a moment. He and his father had different tastes. He had no patience with his father's

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studious litter and his father had no patience with his engines, but Francis believed in him just as much as Jane did.

All the same he said, 'He *thinks* he saw it. I mean another rabbit. He wanted Pete to miss for your sake. You both wanted it badly, and wanting makes you imagine things. You both felt the same and imagined the same thing, but I don't think it happened.'

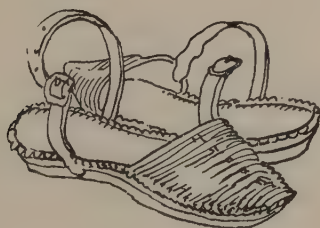
'It did happen.'

'I'll believe it when I see it.'

'You won't see it because you don't believe it,' Jane answered with conviction.

'Why shouldn't I see it?' Francis was beginning argumentatively, but on seeing his sister's expression he changed his note. 'Have you tried it on Mother?' he asked.

'I'm not trying it on any more people,' Jane said finally. 'Leave it alone.'



Chapter Three

THE HINNABELS had neighbours called the Luxtons, to whom they were bound with many ties. One of these ties, as Mr Hinnabel was apt to say in his own manner, was cordial hate.

“Those Luxtons make me mad!” Jane would burst out from time to time, erupting back into her own house after some passage with the Luxtons which had gone wrong, or on hearing of the Luxtons’ behaviour in a certain set of circumstances in which the Hinnabels’ behaviour would have been quite different.

One of the ways in which the Luxtons made the Hinnabel children mad was perfectly innocent. The Luxtons were a lot more prosperous. Though the Hinnabels were second to none in family pride and family loyalty, and had not the slightest desire ever to *be* the Luxtons, they had a strong inward feeling that the Hinnabels would have done something pretty handsome with the Luxton advantages. Mrs Hinnabel, when drawn into discussions on the subject, would say—partly, Jane suspected, to tease, and partly, Jane also suspected, because she really meant it—that the Luxtons probably thought they could have done something pretty handsome with the Hinnabel advantages. The difference between the families could be stated simply by saying that Mrs Hinnabel made

a lot of the family clothes and Mrs Luxton bought the family clothes in the best shops. It could be stated in another way by comparing Mr Luxton's study with Mr Hinnabel's. Mr Luxton's study was an unreal little apartment, highly polished and brightly cretonned, with a very clean blotter and a lot of smart writing-paper of different sizes marshalled in a red lacquer stand. There were also two brown leather chairs, highly polished, and a pipe-rack. The room in fact had a slight air of also having been bought whole at one of the best shops and having never yet been taken into daily wear.

Mr Luxton was in the City. There were three Luxton children whose ages fitted in pretty well with the Hinnabels'. James Luxton was fourteen and was at boarding-school, Jocelyn was twelve, and Lionel, the youngest, was ten. There was a big school in the village for both boys and girls, to which Jane and Jocelyn went, and also Francis and Lionel, but at school the families had little to do with each other, as the children were all in different forms. Their contacts were reserved for out-of-school hours and the holidays.

Askham, where the families lived, had once been a village thirty miles out of London. London was now reaching towards it, but the Hinnabels' home, which was one of the few old houses remaining, still had a country air about it, although the houses near it, in one of which the Luxtons lived, were more up-to-date. One of the best things about Askham, which the growing townishness could not destroy, was a great reservoir, a long, irregularly-shaped stretch of water, locally called 'The Pond'. It was supposed that it had had its beginnings in a natural lake or pond. At any rate it was water, a splendid sweep of it, so nobody at Askham need want for entertainment. Both the Luxtons and the Hinnabels spent much time in and

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on the water. The children had all grown up with it, and this was one of the bonds that drew them together without making any of them mad. Most of the local families had boats of one kind or another, and sailing-races of varying degrees of seriousness were a feature of the place. Mr Luxton, in spite of his study, was very much on the spot when it came to sailing. His boat was very smart and correct and his clothes were perhaps a little too smart and correct, but it had to be admitted that he was no mean performer.

In the matter of boating, the Hinnabels were in one way very fortunately placed. The reservoir, making a great curve, touched the bottom of their paddock. There they had moored an old flat punt and a middle-aged dinghy, and from their back windows they commanded a fine view of the water.

One morning in late April, about three weeks after the proving of the Rod, the two elder Luxtons had come across by way of their field and the Hinnabels' paddock to find their friends. The Easter holidays were nearly over. The first fine careless rapture of release was spent; it was rather difficult to think of anything to do; there was a slight feeling of being in the doldrums. But the shadow of term was beginning to loom: it was fearfully important not to waste any of the few days of freedom that remained to them. All four of them stood about the house for some time, getting in Mrs Hinnabel's way, then Jane and Jocelyn withdrew to Jane's room. In a few minutes the boys entered and found their sisters sitting on the window-seat, apparently doing nothing.

'You two girls coming for a sail?' inquired James, a little too heartily.

The two girls looked at one another.

'Lovely bright morning. Lovely lot of wind.'

It was indeed a brilliant morning, and there was no doubt at all about the wind, which blew piercingly from the east.

'Well . . .' began Jocelyn doubtfully.

This was a known situation. With this amount of wind any boat needed two people, a helmsman and a crew to act as ballast. It was the girls' part to be the crew. They had had plenty of experience. It could be exhilarating, but on a morning like this it could be unspeakably cold.

'Come on. We shan't get a lot more chances.'

'It'll be fearfully cold,' said Jane.

'What does that matter?' James answered impatiently. Then, seeing that he was not gaining ground, he offered, 'We can swop families, if you like. Jane come with me'; the idea being that the discipline would be rather less fierce and the orders not so short and sharp, with somebody else's brother at the helm instead of one's own.

'We ought to do out the dolls'-house,' Jane murmured.

'The dolls'-house!'

'Mother said if we were going to keep it we *must* do it out every holiday,' said Jane piously.

'How *can* you be so infantile!' exclaimed Francis in exasperation.

The dolls'-house was a feminine sheet-anchor to which the girls clung. They were far too old to play with it, of course, and used it as an alibi when they wanted to escape from the boys or to withdraw. And yet, in their hearts, without any pretending, they still loved it, and at rare intervals the moment came for them to shut themselves up in Jane's room with it and put it to rights, or pretend to put it to rights.

'You *know* we can't go out alone in all this wind,' said James accusingly, abandoning cajolery. 'We *must* have a crew.'



'Take each other, then. Go in one boat.' Jocelyn had had enough of it. 'We don't care what you do.'

'Oh, *come* on,' said Francis to James, seeing that persuasion was useless. They went out and could be heard for a minute banging about in Francis' room in the search for warm clothes.

The dolls'-house had been a bit of improvisation on Jane's part, but now the girls felt that for decency's sake they must tidy it up. They lifted it together and brought it over to the window-seat, where the sun was so warm that it was hard to believe in the iciness of the blast outside. Kneeling before it they opened the front and gazed on the confusion within. The dolls'-house was a wonder in its way, begun by Mr Hinnabel for Jane when she was two, and finished by Mr Hinnabel (under accusation from Mrs Hinnabel of wilfully keeping the toy for himself) when Jane was six. It was now grossly over-inhabited and over-furnished, since for years, in fact ever since it had ceased to be an active toy and had become a charming reminiscence of infancy, Jane and Jocelyn had held it in common, both collecting for it whatever was suitable and in character. They began now to take out the tiny, china-headed dolls and lay them on the window-seat. Jane gazed at one, rather fetchingly dressed in a tight black bodice and a pink-and-white skirt.

'That was my candy-stripe,' she said musingly, referring to the stuff of the skirt.

'I loved you in that dress,' Jocelyn replied. 'It was so beautiful the way your mother smocked it.'

'It was my favourite for years,' Jane told her, thinking how sweet Jocelyn could be at times. 'I wish mother hadn't given it away.'

'They always will,' Jocelyn said.

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For a little while they did not speak. Handling the tiny dolls and tiny objects, they were like two old people thinking over the good times that were past. But Jane was also turning over something in her mind. Should she tell Jocelyn? Should she tell her about the Rod? It was an enormous secret and she longed to share it with someone of her own age. But it was a secret so unchildish, so extraordinary—it was in a way, she felt, so dangerous, that she debated the rightness and safety of communicating it. And was Jocelyn the right person? She remembered how she had fared with Francis. That attempt at explanation had been horrible and had left her feeling bruised. Would a girl understand better? Jane thought it possible. And what would her father say? In a way it was enough that he shared the secret, but in another way it was not enough, because he did not understand it any more than she did. It was not as if she had been let into some grown-up mystery by Mr Hinnabel. It was that they had witnessed this marvel together, and before it they were both as ignorant as babes. Her father had not pretended, for Mr Hinnabel never pretended, that he had understood, and for that Jane was thankful, and yet at the same time she was conscious of a sneaking wish that he had. It all gave her a lost and unprotected feeling, as if she had suddenly shouldered the burden of being grown-up.

She and Mr Hinnabel had discussed their amazing experience, inevitably, a few days after it had happened. Mr Hinnabel had opened up.

‘Are you thinking about Pete and the rabbit—the two rabbits—when you’re in bed at night, Janey?’ he had asked her.

‘No,’ Jane answered. ‘At least, not to stop me going to sleep. Are you?’

‘A little,’ Mr Hinnabel confessed.

'Do you understand it?'

'No!' There was a strong, unguarded ring in his voice. Then, feeling that perhaps he had been too frank, he continued, 'The world is full of miracles and marvels which we understand—or rather, which we explain to ourselves in various ways. The marvels of science, as they call them, can be both explained and understood by people who are clever enough. A lot of miracles can in a way be *understood* if not explained . . .'

'Our thing isn't a marvel or a miracle. It's magic,' Jane said.

'Ah, magic ——' a curious light came into Mr Hinnabel's eyes and he glanced down at some of the little terracotta objects on his desk. 'It's a strange place for magic to crop up, isn't it? In Askham, in our family, in this year of grace . . .'

'I don't know that it's so strange in our family.'

'What? Are we witches and warlocks, do you mean?'

'It's not like that,' Jane answered slowly. 'But it could happen to us better than it could happen to some people.'

'We're Believers!' Jane saw her father's blue eyes suddenly flare with light. 'There perhaps you're right, my own daughter.'

'Well, look at you. You're not like other people's fathers. But you still don't understand it?'

'I can't pretend I do, Janey.'

'Does it frighten you?'

'Does it frighten *you*?' Instead of answering, her father turned the question on her.

'Not really. It makes me shiver a little when I think of it. But I'm not frightened exactly . . .'

'That's how I feel. I shiver a little, but I keep remembering that the rabbit was saved . . . that the Rod worked, as it were, on our side.'

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'Yes. But will it always work like that? Is it, in a sort of way, ours? Mother started it, you remember, that afternoon about the egg. I invented it, just in a joke, you christened it, you found it and made it, and made it come alive. Is it still alive and will it go on being? Or are there just three wishes in it? And can anybody wish them?'

'I know nothing,' her father said.

So it had been left. And now, as she knelt before the window-seat, it came back to Jane's mind for the hundredth time, and she longed to share the whole thing with someone else. They had emptied the dolls'-house of its entire contents now, and were doing a little cleaning with two pieces of rag.

'The drawing-room walls are very dirty,' Jane said. 'I wonder if we've any of the paper left.'

'I should hate it to change,' said Jocelyn, eyeing Mr Hinnabel's handiwork with affection—the well-planned rooms of different sizes, the springing staircase and the fine hall. 'Really, it *is* rather lovely. I can never stand a dolls'-house with just four plain rooms after this.'

For the second time that morning Jane felt a sudden rush of warmth for Jocelyn. She could understand things, after all. There were never any problems or quarrellings once she was away from the others and she and Jane were alone. They really were almost like sisters, Jane persuaded herself. She and Jos had known each other all their lives. They had done such heaps of things together. They had told each other so many secrets, sometimes in the Luxtons' attic or sometimes in the boathouse at the bottom of the garden. There was something at the back of Jane's mind that still refused to give its consent, but suddenly she over-ruled it.

'Jos,' she said with a rush, 'do you believe in magic?'

The question was so unexpected that Jocelyn sat back on her heels.

'Magic? Do you mean fairies and all that sort of thing?'

'No. Not that baby stuff. Real magic, I mean.'

'What is real magic? People being changed into things when you wave a wand?'

'Yes. I suppose so. I don't know. It's not a wand exactly ...'

'Jane!' Jocelyn knelt up with a jerk. 'What are you talking about?'

'It's hard to explain.'

'Has something happened to you?'

'Not to me. It happened to the rabbit. Only I saw it. We both saw it.'

'What on earth do you mean? I can't understand a thing. Tell me what you're talking about.'

'It started quite a long time ago,' Jane began. 'We were having high-tea, and there seemed nothing much solid to eat, and mother was joking (you know the way she does), and said "If you could have a magic tool" ...'

At that moment the door burst open, and Mrs Hinnabel stood on the threshold. It was clear in a flash that she was by no means joking now.

'*There* you are! Didn't you hear me ringing the bell and calling? Lunch has been on the table ten minutes. There's no sign of the boys, and you two up here deaf as doorposts. What on earth are you doing all this time?'

'We're doing the dolls'-house,' said both the girls guiltily together, stuffing the things back in handfuls.

'Come on, then.' Mrs Hinnabel briskly stuffed in a couple of handfuls on her own account and they quickly closed the front. Her wrath never lasted more than ten seconds, as was well known. 'Mrs Maggs is in a fever. She's made dumplings, and you know they won't wait. As the boys are out we shall have to eat about six each, and they'll be like cannon-balls.'

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THE BOYS had gone in the Luxtons' boat. They had tossed up for it and Francis had lost. It was not quite so amusing to go in somebody else's boat. Then you had to be the crew, and only took the helm for a spell by courtesy. However, the tearing wind gave them plenty to do, and they had an exciting morning. Now, in the sudden quiet that fell with the letting-down of the clattering sails, they were straightening their backs and beginning to put the boat to rights with numbed fingers. They were very cold; and they had been hungry for hours, but somewhere inside themselves they were deeply happy and satisfied. Everything was made fast, the oars were stowed, the whole routine gone through systematically with nothing scamped. It was like stabling one's horse. When they had put the wet sails on shore, James went and borrowed a baler and together they slowly and steadily baled the boat out. Like Jane with Jos over the dolls'-house, Francis felt a strong tie with James over the boat. Also, at this moment, like Jane, he felt a strong desire to talk to somebody about a strange thing, a thing that had been bottled up in his mind now for three weeks.

Scooped up in two battered saucepans, the water was being slopped rhythmically over the side.

'Have you read a book called *The Sword in the Stone*?' Francis asked casually.

'No,' answered James Luxton. 'Is it a thriller?'

'Not really . . .' Francis hesitated.

'Why?' asked James without much interest, not stopping in his steady baling. 'What's it about?'

'It's about Merlin . . . magicians . . . and all that.'

'Merlin? Sounds rather for infants.'

'It is, rather. I've just been wondering lately whether there's anything *in* that sort of thing. That's all.'

'Shouldn't think so. Never thought about it.'

James Luxton was a big, dark boy, heavy for his age. He was not a great reader, though he and Francis sometimes exchanged books. He added, rather by way of being civil to Francis, 'What's made you start thinking about that stuff? Do you believe you've seen a ghost or something?'

'It's not anything to do with ghosts.'

'What is it to do with?'

'You know you read in books about people having wishes—infants' books, of course—people hold something in their hand and wish. Do you think anything like that could ever happen in real life?'

'No, I don't. Do you?'

'Well I don't know really. Something's happened. Or I think it has. Something's been made to happen . . .'

'Oh, that's hypnotism.' James was scornful. 'There's nothing peculiar about that. Lots of people can do it.'

'It isn't hypnotism.'

'Well, it's thought-reading, or something. Come on, let's get on with the baling.'

'I tell you it isn't. Either hypnotism or thought-reading. It's a *thing*, that makes things happen.'

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'A *thing*! You mean to tell me you really think there is some *thing* that you hold in your hand, like Aladdin's lamp, and then wish!'

'Yes. It sounds a bit crazy, I know, and it isn't as simple as just wishing. If only I was a bit more certain that the thing did what I think it did, that I wasn't in some way taken in. . .'

'You *were* taken in,' said James in a superior fashion. 'That's obvious. That's the answer.'

His superiority suddenly enraged Francis, much as, earlier, Francis' own determination not to be convinced had enraged Jane.

'I wasn't, I tell you!' he exclaimed loudly. 'This thing actually does grant wishes. I'm practically certain. I'm not the only person who thinks so.'

James Luxton suddenly stopped baling and sat bolt upright on the thwart of his boat. 'What is this thing?' he asked sharply in an absolutely changed voice. 'Who's got it? Where is it now?'

The change in his companion's voice and manner startled Francis. He had a feeling of having been suddenly jerked back to his senses. '*Warning! Take warning!*' a voice said in his brain. Immediately there was the sound of a small, sharp splash. With a clumsy swing of his baler he had knocked a rowlock from the boat's deck into the water.

'What an *ass* I am!' he shouted, throwing down the baler and beginning frantically to haul up his trousers above the knee. There was a good two foot of icy water over the boat's side. But a rowlock was not a thing to be lost. Nor was it a thing to be lost sight of, as it could quickly bury itself or get trampled into the soft sand.

'No, don't you. I'll get it. I did it,' he exclaimed to



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James, as he began to lower himself with agonised grimaces over the side. James paused in the act of rolling up his trousers. After some cautious treading about, Francis came upon the rowlock with his foot, and, plunging in his arm almost to the shoulder, recovered it and waded to shore.

‘Come on,’ he said briefly between his chattering teeth. ‘Life’s practically extinct.’

There was no more dallying or tidying up. They hung up the sails, snatched their bicycles, and set their faces against the biting wind without a word. Magic and everything else had dropped completely out of the picture. There was only one thing that remained in the picture: the hope of food.

★ ★ ★ ★

It was half-past three when Francis finished the huge plate of stew which Mrs Maggs had kept hot for him in the kitchen. If the dumplings had turned to cannon-balls he did not notice. As soon as his plate was empty he went in search of Jane, and found her in the dining-room.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Oh, nothing.’ She was sitting on the floor in front of a bookcase, as it were accidentally, having pulled a book out of a low shelf.

‘I want to talk to you about something.’

Jane looked up in surprise at the urgency in his voice.

‘About what?’

‘About that Rod, or whatever you called it.’

‘No!’ said Jane sharply. ‘I’m not having any more arguments about that.’

‘I’m not going to have arguments. I want to tell you. I’ve tried it.’

‘What?’ she sat up with a jerk. A curious shiver of excitement went over her. ‘Did it work?’

'Yes. I think so. I can't tell for sure.' There was no scorn or scoffing about Francis now. 'That's what I want to tell you.'

'Did you do it all by yourself?'

'Yes.'

In the midst of her excitement, she felt a slight amazement at his courage.

'What happened? When did you do it? What did you get it to do?'

'It was at the end of term.'

'All that time ago?'

'Yes. It happened by accident really. I hadn't planned it or thought it out. I really hadn't thought any more about what you told me. Jane, I'm sorry I didn't believe you.'

'Never mind. Go on!' Jane said.

'I was bringing home my report. And I was hating the thought of Father opening it. There was a special reason. You know at the end of last term we had a set-to about Latin? He's keen on my learning it, or a certain amount of it. He says he wouldn't make me if I was hopeless, but he knows I could. I suppose actually I could if I gave my mind to it. Anyway, in the end I promised—I gave my promise—that I'd work at it. I did work at it a bit in the beginning of the term. But you know what it is. Anyway, I knew I'd done badly in the exam, hopelessly in fact, and would get a jolly bad all-over mark for it. You know it isn't exactly that one's frightened of him or that he gets into a rage or anything, but it's the way he can say something or just look something that completely freezes you up.'

'I know,' said Jane. 'Go on.'

'Well, I crawled home on my bicycle, then I thought I'd better go and get it over, so I went into the study where he was tinkering away as usual at some of his stuff.'

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'It isn't tinkering.'

'All right. He looked up as though he was miles away, in ancient Troy or somewhere, and that made me think what an ass I'd been and that I might have got off without showing him the beastly thing at all.'

'You wouldn't,' said Jane. 'Mother would have showed it him. They talk it over.'

'Yes. I suppose so. Anyway, he told me to open it, and went on writing. I took it over to the window, where it was a bit lighter, and crossed my fingers and felt a bit sick. Before I'd so much as unfolded it I saw it was worse even than I'd expected—the Latin mark, I mean. It was twenty-one out of a hundred, the lowest I'd ever had. He got up and came over to the window and opened my report out. I was standing with my back to his old cupboard. Suddenly I felt I was leaning against your thing—the Rod. He'd hung it up there out of sight, on a nail. I pushed my back against it as hard as I could and sort of prayed . . . it sounds silly, all I could think of was *Double, double!* . . . I felt a bit frantic . . . Then I heard him say, 'Forty-two . . . that's not so bad, old boy, better than last time. The rest's quite respectable.' And he shoved the whole thing back at me with that agonised look he gives you when you've interrupted him when he's working and he wants to get back to Troy. Of course I was out of the room like lightning.'

'And was it a four and a two? Were the figures changed?'

'No. When I came to . . . I was weak as a rag . . . I spread out my report on the dining-room table and looked at it. The figures weren't changed at all. It was still twenty-one. In the beastly little figures Mattheson makes. I wondered if I'd dreamed the whole thing.'

'You didn't dream it,' Jane said.

'But what happened? Were the figures changed and changed back again?'

'I don't know. I don't think so. But they were changed for father. It worked.'

'Yes, it did work. He said forty-two. He was perfectly happy. But I've been waiting all this time for the whole thing to come up again. You see, I thought Mother'd talk it over with him, and it'd go back to being twenty-one.'

'She wouldn't. If he didn't start it, *she* wouldn't. He's forgotten about it all years ago, and she's letting sleeping dogs lie.'

'It wasn't a big thing, I suppose,' said Francis slowly. 'But it was important. It was very important to me.'

Jane raised her eyes and looked full at him.

'Do you believe in it now, the Rod?'

Francis gave her back the same look. 'I do.'

It was a pledge, a kind of oath. They both knew this was a solemn moment. Jane, in the midst of the half-sweet, half-fearful excitement that possessed her, was conscious also of a deep relief. She and Francis were reunited. He was no longer a stranger, almost an enemy, in this secret and vital thing.

'I only wish I could understand more.'

'Leave it,' Jane told him. 'We may get to, later on.'

'You mean, when we've seen it work more. But how can we know the rules of it, what it will do and what it won't?'

'I know,' Jane said. 'It makes it more frightening. Father doesn't understand it either. Not a thing. I talked about it with him.'

'Have you talked about it to anyone else?'

'Not quite. I was going to tell Jos this morning. I didn't want to really. But I felt so alone with it . . .'

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'Jos! I began on it with James this morning too. I thought he might have some ideas about it. It was worrying me. He's clever. I stopped though, just in time.'

'What d'you mean? Didn't you tell him?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Something suddenly told me not to. He thought it complete rot . . . magic, I mean. And then all at once he suddenly changed . . . sat up with a bang and grabbed it . . .'

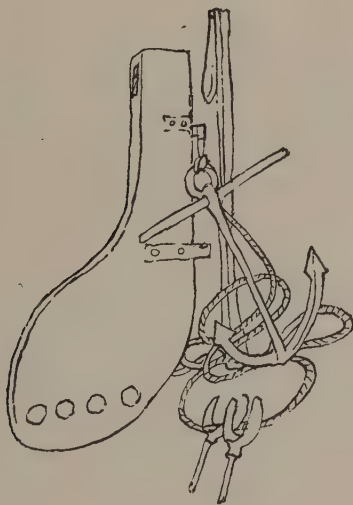
'Grabbed what?'

'The idea. When he grasped that there was an actual thing in it—the Rod. Then something stopped me, and I didn't tell him anything.'

'How did you put him off?'

'I chucked a rowlock into the water. It was nice and cold fishing it out.'

'You had to. We mustn't tell anyone. I know that now. We've got to keep it to ourselves. The Rod's ours.'



Chapter Five

THE THIRD person to attempt to share the burden of the secret had been Mr Hinnabel, and he succeeded. He told his wife.

There were certain things Mr Hinnabel could talk about more easily with Jane than he could with Mrs Hinnabel. Jane was, as he said, his own daughter. In one sense he could talk more easily about the Rod with Jane. But just as Jane had been weighed down by the thought that the secret was great and unchildish, so he too felt that it was unchildish and of the greatest importance, and that his wife must know.

'Jane quite all right?' he asked Mrs Hinnabel one evening as they sat at opposite sides of the hearth.

Mrs Hinnabel looked up from her knitting, surprised. It was an odd question, as Jane at that moment was not known to be other than perfectly well.

'Quite, as far as I know. Is anything the matter? Why do you ask?'

'It's just in case she might be worried. We've had an experience . . .' Mr Hinnabel began again. Then he stopped. What a fantastic thing to begin to trot out by a quiet fireside.

Mrs Hinnabel waited, wondering what on earth could be coming. Then, as there was no help for it, Mr Hinnabel nerved himself and took the plunge.

'Do you remember a conversation we had at tea a little while ago . . . about eggs?'

'Eggs?'

'Yes. About turning one egg into two. You started it yourself actually—quite accidentally, of course—by asking Jane what she would choose if she could have a magic tool.'

'I believe I do remember now you remind me. And you said the tool would be called a Doubling-rod.'

'Yes. We've got it.'

'Got it?'

'Yes. We've got a Doubling-rod, or *the* Doubling-rod. And we've made it work.'

'Who've made it work?'

'Jane and I. Or at least, I spoke the word, and Jane was the witness.'

'You're not serious, of course. Are you?'

'I'm completely serious.'

'You mean there really is such a tool, and you've got it?'

'Yes.'

'How did you get hold of it?'

'I made it.'

'You *made* it!' Mrs Hinnabel was gazing full at her husband, her hands and her knitting dead-still in her lap. 'What *is* this, Paul? Tell me what you're talking about. The whole thing. From the beginning. Don't leave anything out.'

Mr Hinnabel told her the whole story, omitting nothing, while she sat dumb with amazement. When he had quite finished and she was still silent, he said, 'I admit it's something to ask you to swallow.'

'I swallow it. I see that you're not joking. I see that you believe it.'

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'Don't you believe it?'

'I can't exactly *believe* it, not having seen it. I don't think anybody could. But I don't *disbelieve* it. I understand you believe it. And that Jane does. It must have been a shattering thing for her.'

'Yes. Not shattering exactly. I don't think she was frightened; we were neither of us exactly frightened. We were exalted, in a way. But of course it was terrific . . . I feel we ought to be on the look-out in case Jane's worried, although somehow I don't think she is.'

'Yes.'

'You won't laugh it off if she mentions it?'

'Of course I won't. I'll be on the look-out. When did you say it all happened?'

'Last Thursday.'

'That's four days ago. Well'—Mrs Hinnabel gazed at him affectionately—'you've told me some astonishing things in your time . . .'

Mr Hinnabel was not altogether satisfied with that look, though he had to be content with it. There was a whole area in his life, he knew, that passed with his wife and son as 'Father's stuff', stuff that was real to himself, that was, and to nobody else. He fancied that smile of Mrs Hinnabel's meant that she had put the story of the Rod in this area. However, for the moment he must leave it at that.

Mrs Hinnabel, for her part, certainly believed her husband in one way. The excitement with which he had told the story ruled out anything else. She believed that he and Jane had gone through something tremendous together, though whether other people could go through it, or whether it really existed, she did not know. And she too, making a mental note to keep a tactful eye on Jane, left it at that.

The holidays wore to an end and nothing spectacular happened. Everything and everybody seemed outwardly calm and in good order. The last Saturday before the return to school, which was also the last day of April, dawned cloudless. A week ago there had been the piercing wind, even the spatter of sleet. Today it seemed as though Spring had been by-passed, and the year was rushing towards the fullness of May. The sun was not warm . . . it was almost hot. The grass glistened, the daffodils, scarcely opened a few days, looked suddenly languid and seemed to belong to a past season, the notes of cuckoo, blackbird and thrush hammered the ears.

This was a day that did well to be perfect, for not only was it the last Saturday of the holidays, but it was the day of what was called locally 'The Little Regatta', which was a day of informal sailing-races held every year at Askham at about this time, and was a kind of opening of the season and trial trip for the more important Regatta, which took place, with swimming-sports and silver cups, at the end of the summer.

The perfect day was hailed as a gift from heaven on all sides except at the Sailing-Club down by the water, where people were beginning to look over their boats. As the sun rose higher the air grew stiller. There was almost no wind, and without wind there could not be sailing. The same conversation was heard from group to group at the little quay.

'Morning, Paul.'

'Morning, Tom.'

'Morning, Francis.'

'Perfect morning.'

'Perfect. Very little wind, though.'

'Very little.'

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Just behind the Hinnabels, the Luxtons were standing on the hard with another couple of men.

'Morning, Arthur.'

'Morning, Michael.'

'Morning, James.'

'This light wind's all right for *Flying Fish*, but I don't think my old porpoise *Saucy Sue*'ll stand much of a chance.'

The race for which they were all entered was a handicap race, the last on the programme. It was not a race for boats of a class, that is, boats that were uniform in every way and therefore had exactly the same chances and started level. It was a mixed race, for any boats, and handicaps had to be settled according to length of keel and area of sail. The weather also entered into it largely. A light wind was good for the light boats, which would move with the merest puff. The heavy boats, which of course were much steadier, preferred a lot of wind, in fact as much wind as possible. But in these conditions the light boats had to have their sails reefed down—rolled up at the bottom, that was, to reduce them in size, so as to lessen the risk of capsizing. One way and another, to get the fairest conditions for everybody, the handicappers had quite a task. This race, by reason of its hazards, was a popular event, and was keenly contested from year to year. Most of the population of Askham turned out to see it. Often the most surprising people won.

Flying Fish was the Luxtons' boat, and *Gannet* was the Hinnabels'. They were both light boats, not identical but very similar, and pretty evenly matched. Often they raced each other in a friendly way, or found themselves sailing neck-and-neck in friendly races with other boats on the Pond. Mr Luxton was perhaps the better helmsman. At

any rate, *Flying Fish* had rather more victories to her credit. The fathers often sailed with their sons as crews, or sometimes acted as crews while their sons took the helm. This year, now Francis had turned thirteen, he was allowed for the first time to take the *Gannet* out alone, or to go out in it with Jane or some other trusted companion. James Luxton had enjoyed this privilege for a year or more.

During the morning the sun grew hotter and the wind did not increase, and Francis stood about among the boats in moody silence. The Regatta, which coincided with the end of the holidays, was to have been something of a great day for him. His sailing had come on a lot since last year. He had looked forward this time to being something like a useful and competent crew, and contributing, if possible, to his father's victory. Now it looked not only likely but almost inevitable that no crew would be needed at all. The absolute minimum of weight in the boat was necessary. It was obvious that the *Gannet*, in this amount of wind, would move slowly enough with one person's weight in her, let alone two. His disappointment was profound.

Mr Hinnabel also, as they sat down to lunch, was thoughtful and said little; but Jane, who was aware of the situation and was brimming with sisterly anxiety on Francis' account, rushed in headlong with the questions he dared not put.

'Are you taking Francis this afternoon?' she asked her father. 'Will there be enough wind?'

'Of course there won't,' said Francis gruffly. 'Of course he'll have to go alone.'

Mr Hinnabel gazed at his son and daughter thoughtfully. 'I wonder how much James Luxton weighs,' he murmured, in that musing fashion in which he always introduced something that seemed miles away from the point.

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'James Luxton? About eight stone, I suppose,' said Francis irritably. 'What on earth does it matter?'

'I weigh twelve stone,' said Mr Hinnabel, blandly smiling as though congratulating himself very much on this achievement.

Francis cut his meat fiercely, squeaking his fork on his plate. His father was maddening.

'So why,' continued Mr Hinnabel still blandly, and addressing no one in particular, 'should the *Gannet* make the *Flying Fish* a present of five stone?'

Francis sat up with a jerk.

'Is James going to sail *Flying Fish* in the race?'

'That's what I hear,' Mr Hinnabel replied.

'His father'll let him! The lucky beggar!'

'Oh, I expect he'd like his boat to win,' said Mr Hinnabel casually, beginning to peel an apple. He finished the operation with his usual neat gestures, then turned his blue eyes full on Francis, 'So would I mine.'

With a rush of joy Francis saw suddenly what was intended.

'I'm to sail *Gannet*!'

'Well, if you will . . .'

'But alone!' Jane shouted. 'In a race! Can you, Francis? Will he know what to do in a race?'

'We must coach him a bit,' Mr Hinnabel said.

★ ★ ★ ★

More of Askham even than usual turned out to watch the Little Regatta, tempted by the glorious day. Down by the water there was a large and various crowd. Nautical people in jerseys with field-glasses round their necks brushed against prams from which babies solemnly surveyed the water-scene; the bank was lined with old ladies knitting or

gossiping and eating sandwiches out of bags. At the starting-post, where the flag fluttered languidly in the faint wind, a man was shouting through a megaphone; on the farther bank of the Pond the starter was standing with his gun. The long stretch of water lay like a narrow lake or a broad stream between brilliant meadows of grass. There was a half-mile reach that was almost straight before the reservoir took a turn and was lost to sight. The second race of the afternoon had just gone off, and the boats, all clustered together, had reached this bend, which was just opposite the Hinnabels' house.

Above the starting-point the *Gannet* lay ready in the water, with her anchor on shore. Just at the moment there was nothing to be done, and Jane and Francis and Mr Hinnabel were watching the race and talking to their friends. Mrs Hinnabel was not with them.

'It tempts me,' she had said. 'It tempts me mightily. But the thought of this glorious long afternoon to work in the garden and do all my jobs tempts me still more. I shall watch you from the window, Francis, of course.'

The last race was timed to go off at five o'clock. Long before that time Jane was in a subdued fever of excitement. At half-past four she persuaded her father and Francis to begin rigging the boat and hovered over them, dotting the i's and crossing the t's of their every action, coiling down meticulously any loose rope's end, disposing the gear in the boat—anchor, oars, rowlocks, baler—with the most elaborate nicety, as though an inch or two this way or that would decide her brother's success or failure, wondering whether Francis could do with a jersey more or a jersey less, or a peaked cap to keep the sun out of his eyes. Francis grinned at her kindly. He was excited within, but outwardly quite unperturbed. At a quarter to five all was

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ready. Mr Hinnabel gave the *Gannet* a last look over, then held the gunwhale for Francis to get aboard. Francis settled himself with the sheet and the tiller.

'Good luck,' said his father, with a little smile and no instructions at all, and pushed the boat out into the water. For a second or two the sail flapped empty, then, catching a puff of wind, Francis pulled in his sheet, and guided the *Gannet* carefully through the other boats and into the middle of the Pond.

'Good old Francis!' Jane exclaimed, in a glow of sisterly pride.

Mr Hinnabel glanced down at her, smiling. 'Save it up, Janey,' he advised her. 'He won't go off for some time yet.'

Nearly all the boats for the last race were now on the water. From *Flying Fish* to *Saucy Sue*, they were weaving slowly in and out, shouting to each other to ask the time, calculating to be behind the starting-line, but as near as possible, when the gun gave them their signal to be off. It was a perfect sight in the perfect weather, and for a moment, in her joy at it, Jane forgot to be anxious about what was involved. Francis was coming across the water again towards them.

'At the fourth gun!' shouted Mr Hinnabel to him from her side, informing Francis that that would be his signal to start. As he put his boat about Francis held up four fingers to show that he had understood. 'He looks very small,' said Jane anxiously, and added, gazing up at the absolutely cloudless sky, 'I hope there won't be a squall.'

The first gun went off—the minute gun, as it was called, warning the boats that they had sixty seconds before the race would start. All that were still in front of the line steered for behind it. They were to go off in relays, according to their handicaps. Another gun went off, the starting

gun . . . and in a few seconds *Saucy Sue*, followed at a respectful distance by *Dolphin*, both looking extremely stout and solid, crept at a snail's pace over the line. A tiny cheer went up from the bank, which the skipper of the *Dolphin* acknowledged by removing the pipe from his mouth. The most important race of the Little Regatta had begun.

Francis in *Gannet* and James Luxton in *Flying Fish* were to go off at the last gun but one. The start, like the start of a horse-race, was one of the trickiest parts. It was not easy to arrange to be in a good position close behind the line when there was so long to wait and all the other boats going off in front of one were jockeying about and had to be avoided. The small amount of wind made movement slow and the boats slow to answer the helm. It was dangerous to hover too close to the line for fear of sailing over it before the start and having to sail back. On a windy day it might be a good idea to lie well back, but today, if one started too far behind, the lost ground might never be recovered. Francis in his anxiety kept back, and when his gun went he lay behind the other two boats that were to start with him. For a moment all three of them seemed to stand still, almost becalmed; then a puff came, and they sailed gracefully strung out, James first and Francis last, across the line.

A small sound of anguish escaped from Jane. To her the race was as good as lost already. Mr Hinnabel squeezed her hand.

'They've a long way to go.'

The boats sailed slowly down the long reach almost in the same order as they had started. For anyone watching from behind it was difficult to judge who had gained and who had fallen back. But there was nothing to be calculated or wagered yet. Most of the race would be sailed out

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of sight of the spectators at the post. The mark which had to be rounded lay far down the second reach. Down there it was possible that there would be a bit more wind. Conditions would alter and anything might happen. As the boats receded slowly on the water, Mr Hinnabel took the glasses off his neck and put them round Jane's so that she could have a look. Feverishly she turned the sights. 'He's not last, at any rate,' she announced eventually with triumph. 'I believe he's somewhere in the middle, if that's *Gannet*. It's so difficult to see . . .'

'Come on; let's watch these finish,' said Mr Hinnabel, nodding towards the first race, which was coming home.

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Mrs Hinnabel, left alone . . . gloriously alone . . . stretched herself and wondered what she would do with four long, lovely hours all her very own. Her mind was not empty of ideas; there were a thousand things she wanted to do in the house and garden; the daring notion even suggested itself that as it was such a marvellous day, such an absolute gift from heaven, she might do nothing at all. In the end, she drew up a mixed programme—so much for the house, so much for the garden, and a good half-hour, she promised herself, in the sun with a tray of tea and a book.

Time passed, of course, on wings. From the paddock at the bend of the reservoir, and from the upper windows of the house, where there was a splendid view, commanding almost all the length of the home reach, Mrs Hinnabel kept an eye on the Regatta. Towards five o'clock she grew more alert and began to listen, in the midst of her planting-out, for the sound of the starting-guns. She heard them faintly, and after a little while, giving the boats time to

approach, she went down to the water to see them pass. There were fourteen of them, she counted. *Dolphin* and *Saucy Sue* had already fallen back and a boat called *Spray* was leading. The six boats which had started last were now all fairly close, with James Luxton in *Flying Fish* at their head. Of this bunch Francis was fourth, a small figure, sailing, as she could see, with every atom of concentration. She did not wave, for fear of distracting him, but fervently and silently wishing him Godspeed, she watched them round the bend and went back to her work.

What an afternoon! The warmth of the sun on her back was a caress. Blackbird and thrush were crazy with music. The earth was perfect for planting and she thought she might get the whole bed of stocks and sweet-williams in if she worked hard. The two piles of seedlings were diminishing nicely when she heard a chime from the church clock . . . one, two . . . She waited for the second quarter . . . half-past five, or even the second and third . . . perhaps it was as much as quarter to six. Nothing followed the two strokes of the single chime. 'Come on,' said Mrs Hinnabel in her mind to the clock. Still nothing followed. The quarter only. Then it dawned on her. With a gasp of dismay she realised that it was a quarter-past six. She had failed Francis. The race on its homeward way would almost certainly have passed. With the trowel still in her hand, she raced to the house.

The longest view of the water was from Mr Hinnabel's study on the first floor, and, rushing in, Mrs Hinnabel threw up the window with her muddy hands. She was not quite too late. The last of the lovely boats stood on the water almost opposite her eyes. She felt she could have stretched out a hand and touched them. Where was Francis? Which of the boats was *Gannet*? Mrs Hinnabel



scanned the tail of the procession. No, her eyes told her, moving up from boat to boat. Not there. The middle, then . . . again from boat to boat . . . but still No. Four boats were in the lead, sailing in two close pairs. Dare she look? Dare she? thought Mrs Hinnabel. But the incredible was true. In the brilliant light of the late afternoon, she made out on the far side of the water *Gannet* leading by almost a length, with the sun shining on Francis' fair head.

The figure in the second boat was almost equally small, but the head was raven-dark. It was James Luxton in *Flying Fish*.

Mrs Hinnabel gripped the window-sill with her muddy hands. The boats were well up the reach, as it were in the straight, and the light wind at sunset was dying away. Francis might well hold it. But even while she gazed in delight the picture altered. The distance between the points of the two mastheads lessened, *Flying Fish* was stealing up, she was gaining . . . the two peaks of the sails were indistinguishable . . . now the boats must be nearly level . . . in an awful flash of comprehension, Mrs Hinnabel, though no expert, realised what was happening. *Flying Fish* was taking the *Gannet's* wind. For the wind, what remained of it, was blowing from Mrs Hinnabel's side; James was this side of Francis; when the boats were sailing level the wind would strike his sail first and *Gannet* would be blanketed. And it was happening . . . for a second the boats stood dead level . . . the triangles of their sails had merged into a single triangle . . . then, sickeningly, two masts and sails again became apparent; but it was the near one, James, who this time was ahead. Inch by inch the distance between the mastheads widened . . . Francis seemed to be standing still. Mrs Hinnabel could look no longer; there would be no recovering the lost advantage. To her amazement, she

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heard something like a sob rise from her throat as she snatched her head in and gazed desperately round the room.

The Rod hung as it had hung ever since the day of its making, or its quickening into life, against the narrow side of Mr Hinnabel's old cupboard; a whitish, tapering, two-pronged thing. Mrs Hinnabel had fingered it and gazed and wondered after her husband's story: its perfect symmetry was a sort of accident of nature, like a strange stone that savages read magic into, she thought as she returned it, light and dry and manifestly inanimate, to its two nails.

Now, as she snatched her head in from the window, the low sun fell on the Rod, full blaze. The whiteness of it, its pure, strange, simple outline, sprang out from against the dark background. It shone like ivory, it held the gaze and seemed as if it gave off light, as if some sap of life was running almost visibly in its limbs. Some ray, some current was between it and Mrs Hinnabel. It held her; for a second she stood there as though bound captive to it, then suddenly light broke up on her in a wave, and clutching the Rod down strongly, she cried in a great voice, 'Another Boat!'

The sound of her own cry brought her back to herself and she flung back to the window with the Rod still in her hand. The white sails were receding; they were a little less distinct; the pattern of the four leading boats was not much altered, only now James Luxton was ahead, with *Gannet* beyond him on the far side, almost a length behind, and the remaining pair close on their tails. One—two—three—four, Mrs Hinnabel's eyes counted; then, like a moth, like a white bird stealing into the picture, she made it out . . . five! The Rod, at her command, had doubled *Gannet*, and the second *Gannet*, like an image in a mirror, lay this side of *Flying Fish*, close as a leech, taking her wind.

Now all was repeated. *Flying Fish* this time seemed to pause in her slow but steady glide forward, to hang about, to stop. Across the channel that divided them (for Francis had drawn out a little) *Gannet* slowly gathered way and began to creep up inch by inch. Once again the mastheads were approaching, once again, while Mrs Hinnabel's heart almost stopped beating, they were drawing level . . . once again the overtaking was accomplished . . . and as she stood watching, absolutely motionless, Mrs Hinnabel saw *Gannet's* bows draw steadily clear of all the other boats and the sun once again shining on Francis' fair hair.

She drew in from the window with a curious sigh.



As the church clock was striking seven, Jane and Mr Hinnabel burst open the study door, then stood transfixed on the threshold by the extraordinary sight that met their eyes. On the wide window-seat, with her head among the curtains and the Rod still in her hand, reclined Mrs Hinnabel, fast asleep. Roused by their entry, she smiled and stretched herself.

'He won!' Jane shouted. 'We've rushed back to tell you. He beat James Luxton! First he was winning, then he was losing, then he won!'

Mr Hinnabel was scarcely less excited.

'It was wonderful!' he said. 'Absolutely wonderful! He must have sailed the whole course like a master. But it was most extraordinary. He was leading after the bend, with James a length behind; it looked like a safe win. But *Flying Fish* was too near. She must have caught a puff and when she came up *Gannet* was completely blanketed. James passed her, and it all seemed lost . . . *Gannet* couldn't possibly pull up again. But in some extraordinary way she did.

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Flying Fish seemed somehow to get becalmed. It was the most amazing piece of luck.'

In the midst of his tumultuous sentences, Mr Hinnabel suddenly became aware of his wife's calm, smiling gaze.

'You know? You saw? But did you guess what happened? From these windows you can't see the finish . . .'
For the first time he noticed something strange in Mrs Hinnabel's attitude.

'Why are you sitting there asleep? What are you doing with that thing in your hand?'

'I got the Rod to double *Gannet*, so that the second one could come this side of James and take his wind.'

'*Mummy!*' cried Jane, flinging herself round her mother's neck in a passionate embrace.

Mr Hinnabel gazed at his wife with something like awe.
'You thought that out, and got the Rod to help!'

'I didn't think at all. I hardly know what happened. It came to me suddenly that a boat to blanket James was Francis's only hope. It happened in a kind of glorious flash. Tell me, did you see anything at your end?'

'It came up misty, just at the finish,' Mr Hinnabel answered. 'Didn't it, Jane? It'll be another hot day tomorrow. Francis was well ahead, then James overhauled him. We thought it was all up. Then for a minute or two we couldn't see clearly. The boats were jumbled together. This explains it.'

Taking the Rod from Mrs Hinnabel's hand, he hung it with careful, almost with reverent gestures, on its two nails.

'I've thought of something,' Jane said sharply. 'Francis mustn't know.'

'Know what?'

'That it was the Rod that did it. It'd spoil it for him.'

‘He needn’t know,’ said Mr Hinnabel. ‘He did well enough on his own. He quite deserved to win.’

His gaze moved from Jane to Mrs Hinnabel, and then to the Rod, where it rested. ‘Now Francis is the only one,’ he said slowly, ‘who doesn’t know . . .’

‘He does,’ Jane said to his amazement. ‘He knows about the Rod.’

‘Did you tell him?’

‘I tried to tell him, but he wouldn’t listen. Then he tried it for himself.’

‘How?’

‘You may be cross.’

‘I don’t think I will, somehow. Not this afternoon.’

‘He doubled his Latin marks.’

Mr Hinnabel gave a great shout of laughter.

‘When?’

‘At the beginning of the holidays. When he was showing you his report.’

‘Showing me?’

‘Yes. He said it was one of the times when you were rather away at Troy.’

Mr Hinnabel laughed again.

Then, still smiling, but solemn at the same time, he looked slowly from one to another of them once more.

Jane spoke his thought.

‘We’re all in it now,’ she said, with a thankful air of gathering the family together.

‘Yes,’ said Mr Hinnabel. ‘Believers all.’

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THE POWERS of the Rod! What were they? What could and would it do, and what not do? The four Hinnabels wrestled with these problems together and came to no conclusion; then they wrestled with them independently.

To Mr and Mrs Hinnabel the answer, at the moment, seemed the same: leave it alone; let well alone. The Rod so far had played up handsomely; the occasion had presented itself and the Rod had risen to it. Just how the result had come about each time they hardly knew. Each time it had been a crisis, a moment of great excitement. Had they made the Rod act, or had the Rod with some strange power directed them to make it act? Who could tell? Better not meddle with what they did not understand. Better far not try to take control. It seemed to them the safest way, the only way.

But such a passive course was hardly possible for Jane and Francis, particularly for Francis. He must know more. He could not be content until he had explored farther. He was itching to put the Rod to other kinds of tests.

He and Jane talked it over.

'Father says, Let the Rod be,' he said, 'but how can we? It may be all right for him . . . he isn't interested . . .'

'Of course he's interested,' Jane interrupted hotly.

'But not in any practical way,' urged her brother. 'All he's interested in is whether they had one in the Pyramids. He's a million miles behind the times . . .'

'Who made it?'

'Yes, that's true,' Francis admitted. 'You're quite right. Nobody else could have invented it.'

'He doesn't think he invented it, I can promise you that.'

'What does he think, then?'

'I don't know really. I think he thinks he discovered it. Like finding the right clue to a treasure. I think he thinks he somehow let it loose.'

'Let it loose, then . . . I can see that part of it was brilliant enough . . .'

'So I should think.'

'But don't you see, Jane'—Francis grasped her arm in his eagerness—'that's only the beginning. You can't stop there. Father's like an inventor. They're clever enough to think of a thing and make it, and for them that's enough. They're not interested any more. They move on and invent something else. Other people are left to see what the thing'll do. It's the *using* of the Rod that matters to us. It matters terribly.'

'I know,' said Jane, coming round to his side now she had got justice for her father. 'I know what you mean. I've been thinking of it myself.'

'What have you been thinking?'

'Well, up to now the Rod's doubled things but they haven't lasted. They've sort of flashed up and flashed off again. I don't suppose the second rabbit really lasted in the shrubbery with Pete that time. We can't be sure, of course—we weren't there to see. But your Latin marks—they came and went, didn't they? And again . . .'

'Again what?'

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Jane pulled herself up just in time. 'No, I was thinking . . .' By a superhuman effort she had managed not to mention the doubling of the boat.

'I mean, they lasted long enough . . . they did the trick. But what I really mean, Francis,' she cried, as though light was dawning, 'it *was* a sort of trick . . . a trick on Pete and a trick on father. What I want to know is, can the Rod double things solid, double them and make them stay there; things you can touch?'

'That's exactly what I want to know,' Francis agreed.

They gazed at each other solemnly, as though at last they had reached the point.

'I know now,' he continued, 'that there's no business of just waving the Rod and saying Abracadabra. That'd do nothing. You have to want what you wish for like mad.'

'I think that too. I'm sure it can't be used for just anything. I believe that would offend it, or break the spell, or something. I'm sure the thing has to be terribly important—at any rate, to the person who's wishing it.'

'Another thing that worries me is, can *anybody* use it, or only just us? That's a fearfully big point.'

'We've never got to let them try,' said Jane with conviction. 'It's ours. We've got to defend it with our lives.'

'When you said it might be offended,' said Francis, starting from another angle, 'did you mean it? Do you think it could be?'

'Yes, I do,' Jane answered. 'I don't know how, but I do. That's why I'm certain nobody else must get hold of it.'

'You mean it might turn on one?'

'Yes. Magic can. It's the sort of thing you have to be on the look-out for. I feel if we played tricks on it, it might play tricks on us.'

'But what would playing tricks *be*?' persisted Francis. 'That's the kind of thing we've got to find out.'

'Look, Francis,' said Jane, 'you've got to promise me . . . Father and I were in it first and then we let you in . . . you won't try to get it to do anything silly, or something that it'd hate. Think how terrible it would be if we upset it or it stopped working or something.'

'I won't upset it,' Francis answered. 'I'm just as keen on it as you are, I promise you. Keener,' he added, half under his breath, as he went out at the door.



Francis was in no doubt that the thing he had in mind mattered. At the moment it filled his whole horizon, and he thought of little else. It was an air-gun. To other people it might seem unimportant, just as their desires might seem to Francis unimportant, but it was the thing on which he had set his heart. Until the coming of the Rod it had seemed to him impossible. Nobody he knew would give him such a thing, and he had no money to buy it for himself. It was a hope that remained in the back of his mind like the longing for a buried treasure or a fortune. It was in fact beyond him in the ordinary state of affairs.

But the state of affairs was no longer ordinary. The deeds of the Rod made all things possible. From a hidden desire the gun became an open desire, and gave Francis no rest. He saw an attempt to get the gun as the thing ordained to put the Rod to its next proof.

The air-gun Francis wanted cost six pounds. It was a lot of money, but it was a beautiful tool. Francis was a neat-fingered and active boy and had an understanding of machines and tools. He was also an excellent shot. He had an old air-gun, a childish thing with which he had to make

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do. Now, pricked on by the experiment that he intended to make with the Rod, he had worked himself up into a state of resentment. His bicycle was battered and old, his air-gun was battered and old, everything the Hinnabels had was battered and old. He wanted, for once, a brand new and shining thing, the best thing in the shop. He wanted to do himself justice. He was worth a good gun.

The conversation he had had with Jane was much the same as the argument he had been holding with himself for a long time. Up till now the Rod had, as it were, doubled shadows. That was all that had been asked for, and it had handsomely sufficed. But would it double things with substance? Would it, at need, double a gold watch? Would it—this was the burning question—double a pound note?

The night before his experiment Francis laid his plans, which kept him sleepless for a long time. He had to have six pounds. That would have been easy (or it might turn out to have been easy) if he had had three pounds for a start; but he had not. His total hoard, every crease of which he knew by heart, was thirty shillings, in two notes. If he doubled that successfully, he would have three pounds. He would have six pounds if he immediately and successfully doubled it again. But this, he was certain, would be asking too much. It was not the time yet for such liberties. Such an act at this stage would be some kind of fooling with the Rod.

What else, then, could he do? On this he had made up his mind. He must get hold of notes to lay beside his notes, double the lot, and give back what he had borrowed. It sounded like one of the sums they set at school. But as a sum it was not too difficult. What would he have to add to thirty shillings to give the desired result? The answer was three pounds.

He had checked it a dozen times. He had even gone so far as to make sham notes with pieces of paper and go through a practical rehearsal. As a sum, he was satisfied, it was all right.

The next point that troubled him was whether the borrowing of the notes was perfectly honest. But on this his conscience reassured him. If his experiment came off and his four pounds ten shillings turned into nine pounds, he could return the three pounds he had borrowed. If his experiment did not come off and his four pounds ten shillings remained four pounds ten shillings, he could still return the three pounds he had borrowed. There was no question of the borrowed notes being tampered with or used. They were simply to lie as quiet as three leaves on the table, waiting for the magic to work or not to work.

How to get hold of the money required was, in the Hinnabels' house, no problem. Unless the luck was very much against him, Francis could count on finding a few notes in one of the little drawers of his father's desk. He had seen Mr Hinnabel fifty times pull out this drawer and hold out a note to himself or Jane, bidding them not to lose it when they went out on some errand for him. There was never a great sum in the drawer, Francis knew, but unless Mr Hinnabel had made unusual purchases, some money was to be found there any day of the week.

The time fixed by Francis for his attempt was Wednesday afternoon. Like all conspirators and plotters, he needed a clear coast. There was no time when he could count on this absolutely, but Wednesday afternoon seemed his best hope. For him it was a half-holiday; it was the day when Jane had a dancing class, and Mrs Maggs was out. His father went to town every day to the Museum where he worked. That left only Mrs Hinnabel, and it was most unlikely that

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she would spend the entire afternoon in the neighbourhood of her husband's study.

But luck on this particular Wednesday was entirely on Francis' side. When he reached home at two o'clock, Mrs Maggs opened the door to him, already wearing her unchanging velvet toque. 'Just off,' she told him. 'Yer mother's gone to London. She's got shopping to do. Back at six. Yer tea's in the kitchen on a tray.'

Francis watched her down the drive and out of sight. His heart was already beating painfully. Like a thief who had four minutes to crack a safe rather than a boy who had four hours to put through a small exercise, he raced up to his father's study, and opened the desk and pulled out the top right-hand drawer. It was quite empty except for a little thinnish wad of pound-notes. Yes or no? Was it one, two or three? It was three. No more and no less. Clutching them in his hand, Francis sped to his own room as if Old Nick were after him. His own money was folded under the paper of the drawer in which he kept his socks. On the bare top of the chest-of-drawers he laid out the notes with trembling fingers, unfolding them and setting them straight, like a card-player setting out a game of cards. Was there a proper order? Was there a special pattern? He had visions of alchemists and wizards and arrangements of magic triangles and circles to which they pointed with a wand. A wand? A Rod! He had forgotten it! With the speed of light he posted back again down the short flight to his father's study. Yes, there it was, on its two nails. Checking his haste with a kind of desperate care, he lifted it down and cautiously remounted the stairs. The house in the bright afternoon was quiet as the tomb. There was one sound and movement: the hammering of his own heart. The five notes lay motionless on the

polished wood. He touched the last into perfect straightness.

'Nine!' was the word he heard burst from his lips with an awful urgency, as with his trembling right hand he stretched the Rod out over them.

At that instant, with a piercing intensity, the front-door bell rang. Always a startling sound in silence, it broke in now on that moment of wrought-up excitement like a voice from some other world. Dropping the Rod as though guilty, Francis sprang round and in an instant was out of the room and down the stairs. He snatched open the front-door and stood as though preparing to defend the threshold against attack.

'Is the lady of the house at home?'

It was a seedy-looking person selling brushes and brooms.

'No. No. No, thank you. Not today, thanks. No, the lady of the house is not at home.'

Startled out of his wits by the wild boy confronting him, the seedy-looking person fairly tumbled off the step as the door shut.

Francis stood still. By now it would have happened . . . or not happened. Up till now a feverish excitement had rushed him on; there had been room for nothing else. Now he felt a tremor of something like fear. Almost, he dare not go to look. He braced himself and forced himself step by step up the stairs.

From the door of his room Francis saw the Rod lying unmoved across the polished wood. Under it the card-game lay spread out—a wider game, he saw at a glance—a greater number of cards. Scarcely daring to breathe, he approached it. There were eight green notes, not new, not old . . . he could not tell which he had placed there and

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which the Rod had added . . . and two reddish ten-shilling notes underneath.

Francis gazed transfixed. Bit by bit the beating of his heart died down and very gingerly he lifted the Rod. This, he realised, was the critical moment. Were the notes substance, or were they somehow shadow, and would they crumble into thin air when the current of contact was removed? Nothing happened. He ventured to touch them. To his fingers they all felt alike. With a great throb of relief he realised that so far, all was well.

The next step was to return the borrowed money and the Rod to where they belonged. Which were the actual notes he had taken from the drawer? This was difficult. He tried to work it out by remembering their position as they lay, and prayed he had succeeded. The Rod was re-hung on the side of the cupboard. Holding his six pounds in his hand, Francis looked round to see if the room was changed in the light of the species of miracle that had taken place. No, as far as he could see everything was exactly the same. His eye fell on the clock. It was twenty past two. He felt as though he had lived through a whole lifetime of strain and excitement, and the entire thing had taken less than twenty minutes.

On that the tension broke and he went down and strolled into the garden, stuffing the notes carefully into his breast pocket. Now, with his inner eye, he was gazing at the gun. He was perfectly familiar with its every detail, the smooth butt, the trigger, the lock, the dark, gleaming barrel. He even knew where it stood in the shop—the small, masculine, aristocratic shop of Mr Naylor, which sold only guns, fishing-rods, and sporting-tackle, and had lasted on just as it was from the days when Askham was a little country town. He wheeled his bicycle out of the shed again and on



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to the drive in a state of extraordinary happiness. As he rode he lifted his face to the sun. He felt as though he were strolling about on wings.

Mr Naylor greeted him pleasantly as he pushed open the shop door.

'Good afternoon, sir.'

'Good afternoon,' Francis answered. 'That air-gun . . .'

'Ah, yes. I know the one.' Mr Naylor advanced towards the rack and took it out. Before this, they had discussed it together and Francis had already held it in his hand. Now, for form's sake, he looked the darling object over once again before he said, trying to speak casually, 'I'll take it, please.'

'Yes, sir,' said Mr Naylor with quiet approval. 'I think you've come to the right conclusion, sir. I think you'll be very pleased with this gun.' They moved over towards the counter. 'I'll just wrap it up.'

'It's six pounds, isn't it?' asked Francis, his heart under his breast-pocket beginning to thump again.

'That's right, sir.' The deft fingers were busy with paper and string. 'Wonderful weather we're having.'

They exchanged the well-tied parcel and the six pounds, which behaved exactly like six ordinary pound notes as Mr Naylor bestowed them gently in the drawer of his till. He gave the transaction his whole blessing, glad, as one expert to another, that the tool had got into the right hands, and supposed that Francis had had a birthday, or that somehow his ship had come home.

Holding his treasure carefully across his handlebars, Francis mounted and rode home. As though anxious to placate some unseen watcher, he stopped to put his bicycle away then, carrying the parcel indoors, unwrapped it on the kitchen table and neatly put the brown paper and the

rolled-up string in the proper place. Next the ammunition. He gazed at the beautiful object lying on Mrs Maggs' well-scrubbed table-top. Dare he leave it while he went upstairs? No, he was taking no chances. With the gun under his arm he mounted once more to his bedroom, and in five minutes he was down in the paddock by the water, with gun, ammunition, and scoring-card complete.

Out there in the bright afternoon, time passed on wings. Francis had never experienced such bliss. The gun was all he hoped . . . more. He was like an inventor whose invention was going through its trials without a hitch and doing far more than had been hoped for it. He himself, he found, was a better shot even than he thought. He stationed himself farther and farther from his target and was amazed at the excellence of his score. He began to shoot at marks about the landscape. He was just taking aim at a certain leaf on a certain branch when he perceived Jane coming towards him, still dressed for dancing in a white frock, with her hair loose. She was shouting something as she approached.

'What!' he lowered the gun and shouted back.

'You haven't eaten your tea!'

'Good lord! What time is it?'

'It's twenty past five. What are you doing?'

'Shooting.'

She had come up to him now.

'Whose gun is that?'

'Mine.'

'Yours? Where did you get it?'

He continued to take aim. 'The Rod got it for me.'

'*The Rod!* Stop that, Francis! Put that down! How did you get it? You've got to tell me.'

He lowered the gun. 'The Rod got it for me, I tell you,

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or mostly got it.' Step by step he told her what he had done. The story was held up when he came to the arithmetic. Painstakingly he tried to get her to grasp what had had to be added and doubled to make what: 'No, Jane. You see, we start with thirty shillings . . .'

'Get on. It doesn't matter,' said Jane brusquely. 'You know I can't do sums.'

At the end she asked him one question. 'And you're sure it wasn't stealing? Father's money, I mean . . .'

'I'm perfectly sure it wasn't. The money's still there.'

'I'll look.'

'What d'you mean? Are you going in?'

'I'm going to try a wish myself,' Jane told him with emphasis. 'It's a long way past my turn.'

Already she was legging it unevenly across the rough grass towards the house.

Left alone, Francis set himself to make the most of what time he had left. He moved down the hedge that separated the Hinnabels' paddock from the Luxtons', sometimes firing a shot, sometimes only taking aim. When he reached the water he stood for a long time gazing at it and sighting the swallows. The only interesting thing to aim at was, of course, a moving mark. In a few minutes Jane had joined him again. He saw that she was holding the Rod.

'They're there all right,' she told him.

'What are?'

'The notes.'

'Good. I told you they would be.'

'Come on now, Francis.'

'Come on what?'

'You've got to help me.'

He was still enraptured with his gun. It was difficult, it was impossible for him at that moment to think of

anything else. 'All right,' he said absently, making no move towards it. At that moment there was a quick rustle in the hedge beside them. 'Jane! Just a minute!' he whispered excitedly. 'Watch me! I must!'

There was a sharp report, followed immediately by a loud cry of pain from Francis. Utterly startled Jane threw herself on her brother, who had dropped the gun and was holding both hands clasped to his right eye.

'Francis! What is it?' She tore at his hands to try to get them away.

'The kick! The kick!' sobbed Francis.

Round the bottom of the hedge on that instant strode Mrs Hinnabel, panting, on her arm a dying blackbird, a male, with brilliant yellow beak and black plumage, the bright blood spurting over the feathers and down her new grey coat.

'What is this? What is this?' she was gasping. 'Who fired? See what you've done!'

She grasped the Rod out of Jane's hands, while the children stood there terror-struck, with their eyes fixed on the blood. 'What are you doing with this?'

Then she caught sight of the gun on the grass between them.

'Throw that thing into the water! Throw it away, I say! Throw it away!'

Francis stooped down to gather up his treasure.

'It's mine, I've just bought it. It kicked when I fired. It's given me this black eye.'

'I wish it had given you two black eyes!' cried his mother passionately.

For the second time Francis dropped the gun like lightning, then with a howl of pain he snatched it up again and flung it far out into the Pond.

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It was Mrs Hinnabel's turn to stand aghast, looking down at what she held in her hand.

★ ★ ★ ★

Later, when Jane and Francis and their mother had become calm again, each realised what had happened in the appalling half-minute they had lived through. Francis had shot a blackbird almost over his mother's head, as she was returning by way of the Luxtons' paddock from her afternoon in Town, and the Rod had registered its protest by causing his gun to kick and give him a black eye. Holding the Rod in her hand and wishing furiously, Mrs Hinnabel had doubled that black eye.

They realised also, somewhat painfully, that they were progressing in their knowledge of the Rod. It would obey; but it had notions of its own.



Chapter Seven

ONE AFTERNOON in June, soon after tea, Francis and Jane went to their father's study to get some paint, and found to their surprise that he was already home. He had evidently just come in. His small despatch-case, half-full of papers, lay open on his desk, and beside it was an object wrapped in an old silk handkerchief (soft rags and old handkerchiefs were one of Mr Hinnabel's specialities; he had a thousand uses for them) and he was just preparing to unroll it under Mrs Hinnabel's expectant eye.

'Hallo,' he said to his children. 'Looking for something?'

'Yes,' answered Francis, 'a bit of black paint.'

'In there,' said Mr Hinnabel, jerking his head backward towards his old cupboard. 'Bang the lid on again tight.'

'What's that?' Jane asked, gazing down at the little bundle on the desk.

Without speaking Mr Hinnabel carefully unrolled the handkerchief, revealing a small, spiky bronze figure, which he as carefully set on its legs. He gazed at it devotedly, side by side with Mrs Hinnabel.

'A beauty, isn't he?' he murmured.

It was a curious little figure of a man, about six inches high, with a tall, close cap, big, strange eyeballs, and many

thick long plaits of hair. It was like nothing Jane and Francis had ever seen before. It was hard to say why, but there was a peculiar fascination about it.

‘What is it?’ Jane asked again.

‘It’s an Etruscan bronze.’

‘A what bronze?’

‘Etruscan.’

Jane still gazed uncomprehendingly.

‘Lars Porsena of Clusium,’ began Mr Hinnabel, by way of explanation . . .

‘Lars Porsena of Clusium
By the nine gods he swore
That the great house of Tarquin
Should suffer wrong no more;
By the nine gods he swore it,
And named a trysting day . . .’

‘We know,’ Jane interrupted him. ‘But what’s it got to do with this?’

‘They were the Etruscans.’

‘Who were?’

‘Lars Porsena and Co. He was collecting his people to march on Rome.’

‘Why?’

‘They wanted to get Rome back. They’d once been kings of it, but they’d been driven out. And meanwhile Horatius was getting ready to keep the bridge against them.’

‘At Rome?’

‘Of course. He and two companions stood on the far bank, taking on the enemy three by three to give the Romans a chance to destroy the bridge behind them. But when it fell he didn’t spring back quick enough, and went



down into the flooded Tiber in full armour. And then you remember—

‘No sound of joy or sorrow
Was heard from either bank;
But friends and foes in dumb surprise,
With parted lips and straining eyes,
Stood gazing where he sank.
And when above the surges
They saw his crest appear,
All Rome sent forth a rapturous cry
And even the ranks of Tuscany
Could scarce forbear to cheer

The ranks of Tuscany. That’s the Etruscans.’

Charmed against her will by the verses, but obliged to stick to the well-known family duty of keeping her father to the point, Jane repeated her question.

‘But what’s it got to do with this little man?’

‘He’s Etruscan. The Etruscans made him. I was just trying to tell you who they were.’

‘Did they make this actual one?’

‘Certainly. That’s the whole point. Five or six hundred years before Christ.’

Jane gazed at the little figure searchingly.

‘It has a sort of Chinesey look . . . no, not Chinesey . . .’

‘Eastern,’ said Mr Hinnabel, ‘but not so flat as Chinesey. They came from the East.’

‘What an odd sort of cap, isn’t it?’

‘Yes. A conical cap. Everything about them is odd,’ said Mr Hinnabel. ‘Can you see the way he smiles? All Etruscans have that smile. As though they had something mysterious up their sleeves.’

Jane picked up the little figure to have a better look at it.

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'Careful!' said her mother rather sharply.

Her daughter looked up surprised. 'It can't break, can it?'

'You never know,' said Mrs Hinnabel. 'Better put it away, Paul.'

Mr Hinnabel re-rolled the statuette in his silk handkerchief and laid it in a drawer.

'Don't you want your paint?'

'Oh, yes.' Francis, who had said nothing all along, went over to the cupboard and chose out what they wanted and he and Jane went out.

Going into the study the next afternoon by chance (Mr Hinnabel kept nobody out of his room on the understanding that people respected his things and did not touch them) Jane found Francis standing by the desk.

'What are you looking for?'

'The drawer's locked,' he said, without answering her question.

'Which drawer?'

'This one.' He pulled it to show that it did not open. 'The drawer where he put the Etruscan thing.'

'Were you looking for it?'

'Yes.'

'Why? I thought you thought his stuff was silly.'

'I do rather . . . as a rule. But there was something about that little object. Why has he locked the drawer? He never locks anything up, not money or anything.'

'He wouldn't lock *money* up.'

'Perhaps it's valuable.'

'The little man? Could it be?' asked Jane excitedly.

'Of course it could.'

'He didn't say it was.'

'People don't advertise that sort of thing. Mother seemed

interested, and a bit jumpy, I thought. They're so clever at hiding things, but of course they never take us in.'

'Where did it come from?'

'I don't know. The Museum, I suppose.'

'I wonder what it's all about.'

'We shall discover,' said Francis loftily. 'In good time.'

★ ★ ★ ★

Francis, and indeed the whole family, were destined to discover something about the little figure much sooner than they had expected.

At half-past six that same afternoon, while Francis sat in the dining-room piously wrestling with his homework, he heard himself summoned by his father in an extraordinary, almost a terrible voice.

'Francis!'

It was a shout of command, anger, alarm: it was so utterly unlike any sound that he had ever heard issuing from his father's lips that Francis dropped his pen and for a moment sat rigid.

'FRANCIS!'

The second shout brought him thundering up the stairs as he rushed headlong to obey.

'Who's been monkeying about with this drawer?'

Mr Hinnabel stood by his desk in an extraordinary state of agitation, jerking the locked drawer furiously by the handle.

'I don't know. I haven't.'

'It's locked.'

'I know.'

'How do you know?'

'I tried it.'

'You tried it? What for?'

'I wanted to have another look at the thing.'

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'When?'

'This afternoon. I thought you'd locked it.'

Summoned by the electrifying shouts, Jane and Mrs Hinnabel were by this time also standing in the room. Mr Hinnabel turned to his wife.

'This drawer's locked.'

'Did you not lock it?'

'I? How could I lock it? You know I never lock anything. I haven't got a key.'

Once again, with that violence which was so extraordinarily unlike him, he jerked at the handle.

'You're sure it's not stuck?'

Reluctantly he made way for Mrs Hinnabel while she gently tried to ease the drawer open herself.

'No. It feels locked.'

They stared at each other in the blankest amazement.

Scarcely daring to break in on it, but feeling that she must speak, Jane said: 'Could there be something jamming it from behind?'

Mr Hinnabel turned that same strange glaring gaze on her, as if she were something dropped from the skies; but Mrs Hinnabel, with a gesture, motioned her to go to try to look. In a passionate desire to be of some assistance, Jane craned herself over the far corner of the big desk, straining her eyes to see something, some protruding wedge of paper or lump of old silk handkerchief in the dark crack between it and the wall. After a moment Mrs Hinnabel came to her rescue and succeeded in pushing out the heavy piece of furniture an inch.

'Mind, Jane, a minute,' she said, bending over, without much hope, in her turn. Then, being able to see nothing, she pushed her hand and arm down the crack as far as they would go.

Watching her, the three of them suddenly saw her expression change.

'Move this, Paul!' she said sharply to her husband. 'Move it out!'

Before Francis could lift a finger to help him, Mr Hinnabel had heaved the corner of the desk, with a sickening wrench to its timbers, right out into the room. She must have her fingers on it somehow—the precious bundle—somehow it had got stuck, in some impossible way it was there . . .

What met their astounded gaze was an emptiness, a rectangle of darkness a little way down from the top. They stood there gazing stupidly, gaping, understanding nothing, until, seeing Mr Hinnabel suddenly move and thrust his hand and arm into the void, they realised that the back of the second right-hand drawer, where the bronze had lain, had been cut away. Still gaping stupidly, they watched him withdraw his hand, move round his desk, and sit down heavily in his chair. Anger had gone out of him, light had gone out of him, life had three-parts gone out of him.

'It's been stolen,' he said.

After a minute he raised his head and turned to his son.

'I'm sorry, Francis,' he said, speaking in the same dead voice, 'yelling at you . . .'

Francis shook his head slightly, 'No.' It was he, who, after a long pause, ventured to break the awful silence that had descended on the room.

'It belonged to the Museum, I suppose.'

'Yes.'

'Is it very valuable?'

'Yes. Or it may turn out to be. I don't know much about that side. The point is it hasn't even been valued. I brought

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it home to tinker about with it, clean it up. It had been painted at some time, with oil paint. I daresay you didn't notice, but there were still some traces on it. I had a fancy to do the cleaning up myself. It came into my hands in an odd way . . .'

He pulled himself up, aware that his wife was gazing at him. Francis and Jane had seen this look on their mother's face before. It meant that their father might be forgetting they were children, going too far. Mr Hinnabel made an impatient movement.

'It's no use telling them half the story.' He turned again to Francis. 'I wouldn't have told you all this—not because I don't trust you: of course I do, but simply because there was no need for you to know it. It was a very valuable thing to have lying about the house, there was something rather strange about the transaction; obviously the less people in the know the better. However, now I must tell you.

'An Italian brought it to me at the Museum, a poor man, as far as one could see. His story was that it had been in his family from way back, hundreds of years, and that his family came from Todi, which was an Etruscan place. He said they were Etruscans. That of course was fantastic; however, it needn't be gone into. They might well have found the thing generations ago, and kept it. Of course they thought it was a kind of charm, a magic thing. Everybody feels a sort of magic about these Etruscan things. Naturally, I asked him why he wanted to sell it now. He said he was a poor man and wanted the money, and didn't believe in charms. Or if it was a charm, it was a bad charm. His father was dead and he was now head of the family and could do what he liked. He also let out something about an old grandmother . . . I gathered there

was an ancient crone in the background who didn't want to part with the thing. But the authority was his; he could do what he liked. He left the Bronze with me and I gave him a proper official receipt for it. He didn't like leaving it, but there was nothing else for it. Then we set about trying to check his story. All sorts of people bring all sorts of things to the Museum, you know, some of them stolen, but as far as we could discover, everything he said was true enough. The bronze certainly had never been seen in England before, and no loss was reported from anywhere else. Lots of precious things like this are kicking about the world in odd places until they come to light. Anyway, we bought it. It was a capture, not only valuable, but exceptionally beautiful in its strange way, and queer—well, you saw it. It was the figure of a priest, of course, with those long plaits . . .'

'That was what made me try the drawer,' Francis said.

'What was?'

'The queerness. I wanted to have another look at it.'

'We shall be lucky if we any of us get another look at it,' Mr Hinnabel answered, the hopelessness coming back into his voice.

'But why like this?' Mrs Hinnabel was pulling at the handle of the locked drawer again. 'That's what I don't understand. Why couldn't they just open the drawer and take it out? Why have they locked it?'

'To gain time, I suppose,' her husband answered. 'I looked at the bronze last night, about eleven, before I went to bed. Anybody, even if they didn't know my movements, would guess that most likely I wouldn't have a chance to look at it again till half-past six tonight. Locking the drawer would throw any odd person, not myself, off the scent. They'd suppose I'd locked it. That's what

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Francis supposed.' A thought struck him. 'What was the time when you tried the drawer?' he asked his son.

'I should think about half-past four. I'd just got home from school.'

'Then all we know is,' said Mr Hinnabel, 'that it was taken between eleven o'clock last night and half-past four today.'

Once again his family gazed at him. In books this was the moment when somebody said, 'Shall we send for the Police?' Burglaries and sending for the Police were natural in books, but they were loathsomely unnatural in life. Standing there, the four of them were possessed by the same thought. Some evil presence had been here in the familiar room. In dead of night, or in broad daylight it had done its work, making its strange and somehow horrible assault on the great desk, that, more than any other thing, was the keystone and centre-piece of the house. The assault had been already made; the presence had already been and gone, when Francis and Jane had stood in the same room earlier in the afternoon. Instinctively, Mrs Hinnabel put her arm with a protective gesture round Jane's shoulders.

The gesture seemed to rouse Mr Hinnabel, and make him take its meaning.

'They've come and they've gone, whoever they are,' he said. 'It's rather horrible to think of, but it's over; they won't come again. They've got what they want. They seem to have touched nothing else. They haven't at any rate made a disgusting wreckage and confusion. If we hadn't tried the drawer we would have seen and known nothing. So don't let's dwell on that part of it. Help me to put this back, Francis.' They moved the desk half-way back into place, so that Mr Hinnabel could still examine it if he wished. 'And now I've got to think. I've no more idea

than a babe in arms what to do.' For the first time that afternoon, the ghost of a twinkle was seen in his blue eyes. 'But you know, of course, what *you've* got to do?'

Francis was beginning to look up with an earnestly questioning gaze, but Jane, with a rush, answered the twinkle.

'Keep mum!'

'Yes. Utterly mum. Mum not only in words but mum in deeds and mum in looks. Nobody must be allowed to guess *anything*. I don't need to tell you,'—the twinkle had now vanished again utterly—'that it's important. For me it may be terribly important.'

In an awed silence the three of them trooped out of the room.



Chapter Eight

MR HINNABEL'S loss hung over the family heavily. Nobody mentioned it, at least not publicly; out of doors Francis and Jane forgot it easily enough; but coming home gave them the feeling of entering a house where there was a secret sorrow. They had at least the comfort of knowing what form the sorrow took. They did not have to watch their parents' anxiety and imagine that the trouble was even worse than it was because they were kept in the dark; but on the other hand they wore themselves out, or at least Francis did, with trying to think of ways to discover the thief.

'Has Father any ideas? Do you know what he means to do?' he kept asking his mother.

'No,' she replied, 'and I don't suppose he'd tell us if he had. The only thing to do is to leave him alone and carry on as if nothing had happened. It's not the end of the world, we must remember,' she added.

But to Mr Hinnabel, being what he was, they all knew that it was the end of the world near enough. If the loss had been a jewel, or a large sum of money, although it might have been crippling, it would have affected him in another way. The Bronze was unique, it could not be replaced. It was his capture, it was his responsibility—and above all, it was the kind of thing he adored and could appreciate

better than anybody else. Never very talkative, he became at this juncture almost terrifyingly silent. It was as if he did not want to be recalled for a single instant from brooding on the problem of how to try to get his treasure back.

As they all sat at high-tea on the following Saturday, Mrs Hinnabel, in motherly fashion, inquired how her son and daughter had got on during the afternoon. Francis had been playing cricket. He gave an account of his fortunes and misfortunes.

'And you, Jane? What have you been up to?' Mrs Hinnabel asked when he had done.

'I've been with Jos.'

'What doing?'

'We were shopping.'

'What a beastly way to spend Saturday afternoon,' put in Francis unkindly.

'It wasn't. She had some special things to buy, and I helped her. We met Mary Ross and her mother and they took us back to see their new spaniel. We had lemonade in the garden. And we had a long chat with Hokey-Pokey in the Mill Wood.'

'Hokey-Pokey!' Mrs Hinnabel was astonished. 'Is he about again? I thought he'd packed up.'

'I know. He told us last year—'

'Was he selling ice-cream?'

All three of them stared in amazement at Mr Hinnabel as he asked the question. It was the first time he had uttered a word in general conversation for days.

'No. He wasn't dressed as an ice-cream man. He was in his Sunday best. He didn't seem to recognise us at first, and dived behind a tree, but we shouted and waved to him and then he stopped and talked. He gotta da new baby, da new boy baby.'

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‘Has he got it here?’

It was Mr Hinnabel’s voice again. What extraordinary things he chose to be interested in, Jane thought.

‘No. It’s at Isling-stin or Willis-din or somewhere. He didn’t seem very clear about it himself. You know how excited and jumbled-up he gets when he talks.’

‘Did you gather what he was doing here?’

‘It was something about his ice-cream cart, gctting it mended or something.’

Mr Hinnabel relapsed again into profound silence, and they finished their high-tea.

The next day was Sunday. After yet another silent meal, at midday, Jane was just preparing thankfully to escape into the garden when her father addressed her.

‘Coming for a walk, Jane?’

The weather was fine and warm, almost too warm for energetic walking, and Mr Hinnabel’s walks were apt to prove energetic—at least, to the pair of shorter legs at his side. There was a moment of silence. Jane would really rather have declined; but she felt her mother looking at her in a kind of suspense: she sensed that the offer was a step towards recovery on Mr Hinnabel’s part, and that Mrs Hinnabel was anxious for her not to refuse it.

‘All right,’ she said, hoping to sound a little more enthusiastic than she felt.

‘I should take a hat, Jane,’ Mrs Hinnabel suggested. ‘The sun’s going to be hot.’

When Jane came back with her hat, Mr Hinnabel was waiting for her at the front door, he too wearing a hat, an ancient French straw known in the family as the Bee-keeper, and also, most amazingly, a long coat.

‘Could it *rain*?’ Jane asked him, dumbfounded.

Mr Hinnabel gazed left and right in the cloudless heaven.

'You never know,' he muttered. As he was the last person in the world ever to wear an overcoat and his ideas generally were of the most Spartan, this exhibition of weakness impressed Jane more than anything else with the depths of his pessimism and gloom.

At the drive gate they turned not left, towards the country, as would have been natural, but right, towards the town. This again, for Mr Hinnabel, was strikingly out of character. It was his nature to avoid the town and the shops like the plague. And to choose it on Sunday!

'Where are we going?' Jane asked him, having expected him every moment to take a side-turning, which he did not.

By way of answer, Mr Hinnabel mutely waved his arm forward in the direction they were going. Jane plodded on resentfully. What an odious walk! Particularly as she had not wanted to come. The High Street on a Sunday was hideous. Now that there was no bustle to fill it, one could see how the once-decent little old houses had all been torn to pieces and filled in with the gaping plate-glass windows of shops. They made their way right to the bottom of the street, to where the little river Aske, that gave its name to the town, was spanned by a bridge.

'Now where?' asked Jane again, unable to keep a slight impatience out of her voice.

'This way,' Mr Hinnabel answered, pointing over the bridge—and at last, to his daughter's relief, seeming to suggest, although vaguely, that he had some object in view.

They crossed the bridge and followed a footpath by the water on the far side, till they came to the Old Mill, where they paused to gaze up affectionately at the fine old building, now of course disused, and to gaze down at the Mill pool, hoping to see a fish rise to the rods of the two boys

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who were fishing at its edge, silent as statues. No fish rose, and Mr Hinnabel continued his way into the wood that lay at the side of the Mill. Once, clearly, it had been a great wood, perhaps a forest; now it was reduced, for a road had been cut through it, but it still felt like a real wood; the trees were huge and old and there was still the sense of mystery and solitude.

Mr Hinnabel walked down the main path till they were out of sight of everything but trees and light and shadow, and then stopped.

'Where was it, now?' he asked.

Jane gazed up at him, and met her father's blue eyes gazing down. It was the way the Hinnabels, or at least Mr Hinnabel and his children, were fated to gaze at each other. 'What was he talking about?' their gaze asked. And his gaze answered, 'Why did they not know what he was talking about, which was important, which was obvious, which was what everybody must have been thinking about all along?'

'Where was what?'

'The place where you met Hokey-Pokey?'

'Hokey-Pokey!'

'You met him yesterday—here, you said. Whereabouts was it? Try to think.'

Jane glanced about her earnestly, then raised her arm and pointed diagonally forward, to the left. 'We came in over there, by Dark Alley.'

'By where?'

'Dark Alley. That's what Jos and I call it. It's where the dead trees and all that beastly ivy is. We have to make ourselves do it, otherwise we'd get so that we wouldn't dare.'

'Where does it come in? Your path, I mean. Does it join on to this?'

'No.' Jane was beginning to walk forward. 'It doesn't join on to Broad Walk. It comes into that path on the left.'

'Where was he coming from?'

'Hokey-Pokey?'

'Yes.'

'I don't know. He was just going away when we saw him. I told you, we shouted and waved him back.'

'Were you in the Broad Walk then?'

'Yes.'

'And he?'

'A bit off to *that* side.' This time she pointed to the right and still kept moving forward.

'But much farther in?'

'Oh, yes, *much* farther in.'

'Go on, then. I'll follow.'

Jane went on. She knew at least the first part of what she had to do. She had to find the point where Dark Alley joined the side-path, then from there take the same way as they had taken yesterday from that spot to the Broad Walk. She found the junction, stood uncertain for a moment, then struck off again through the thick summer green to rejoin the Broad Walk.

'I don't remember that,' she said suddenly.

'What?'

'That stump. Where that tree's been cut off.'

It was a fresh, raw stump. Jane gazed at it anxiously, then gazed more anxiously at her father's face. She was beginning to be muddled, to be frightened of failing him.

'Janey, look . . .' All at once, to her immense relief, Mr Hinnabel was talking like his old self. 'You go on. I confuse you. I'll sit and wait on this stump. Don't get worried. You'll find it all right. It doesn't matter how long you take. The place where you came out into the Broad Walk. Or as

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near as you can. You don't mind wandering about the wood alone, do you? If you get scared, just give a call. I'll hear you and come at once.'

She turned back towards the junction of Dark Alley and the side-path, leaving her father seated on the stump, a strange figure in his straw Bee-keeper and long grey rain-coat, poking the ground with a stick. As soon as she was out of sight, Mr Hinnabel got up and made his own way to the Broad Walk, waiting for her to come out above or below him, and after about ten minutes he saw her blue dress moving a long way ahead. She waved, and he walked up silently and joined her.

'It was there. Over there.' Now she was pointing excitedly across the Broad Walk, far over to the right.

'You see that dead beech?'

'Yes.'

'Well, behind there's an oak.'

'I can't see from this distance, but they all look to me like oaks.'

'It's the tallest, just behind. With a straight trunk for an oak. That's the place where we saw him.'

'Did you talk to him there?'

'No. He had his back turned to us, and was standing looking up. When we shouted he came running towards us. We were on this side of the beech, half-way to . . .'

At that moment Jane felt her father strongly grip her shoulder. She heard him whisper tensely in her ear, 'Don't rustle!' and in the same second he slipped swiftly behind the tree by which they stood. In another second Jane stood panting beside him, crushing herself against his coat. Removing the Bee-keeper from his head, Mr Hinnabel bent and put his lips right to her ear. 'I saw something move over there, right in the distance. Be absolutely still.'

He replaced his hat as if its passage through the air might cause a noise of tearing, and, pressed together behind the trunk, they remained as still as a marble group. After a minute Mr Hinnabel again removed his hat with utmost caution and moved his head sideways inch by inch, until his outer eye just cleared the trunk. Jane saw that he was looking across Broad Walk into the depths of the wood, far over to the right of the beech. After they had stood like this, absolutely motionless for what seemed like hours, he slowly drew his head back to its original position.

‘It is!’

‘Hokey-Pokey?’

They did not whisper, they merely shaped the words with their lips. Again, as though fearing that the movement might cause the nape of his neck to crackle, Mr Hinnabel, his blue eyes flaring, gave the minutest nod with his head.

On the look-out once again, Mr Hinnabel remained motionless. With his arm pressed round her, Jane could not tell whether it was her heart or his that shook them with its beats. The whole wood was strangely silent, as if it too was in suspense. All at once, straining her ears, Jane caught a sound . . . a brush, a rustle, almost inaudible, yet too large and formless to be made by any little pattering creature. It stopped; it came on again; it stopped again; it came again. Some human being was moving through the wood.

Drawing once more behind the tree, Mr Hinnabel motioned her in dumb show to do as he had done. Jane took off her light-coloured hat, put it at their feet, then in her turn moved her head inch by inch until with one eye she could see round the trunk. She gazed. In the dappled light she could see nothing but sun and shadow, a glimpse



of brilliant cloud high up and far away, a carpet of brown leaves, and a tracery of brilliant green and dark branches near the ground. The rustling, brushing noise again struck her ears. She tried to make her eyes follow. All at once they found their target. Something lightish, not white, not brown . . . it was the face of the man who crept along, now straightening himself, now crouching, as he made his way over the fallen leaves under the trees. Keeping a steady but uneven course, the figure in the distance came on. When her straining gaze that could strain no more made it out to be almost on its mark, she was recalled with a shock of alarm by a movement at her side. Movement! that was fatal, that would lose all. What was her father doing? Still standing rigid, she perceived that with feverish fingers he was unbuttoning his coat and groping inside it with his right hand over his breast. With frantic care not to break the delicate thing in that restricted space, he drew the Doubling-rod clear all its length, then, shifting his hold on it, thrust the head forward round the tree so that it too cleared the trunk, and in a whisper whose urgency seemed to shake him to the roots of his being, pronounced the words: 'In the oak!'

From where they were they could not see what had happened. The light was too changeful; they were too far away. With a pressure of the shoulder, Mr Hinnabel signalled Jane still not to move. For whole minutes, as it seemed, they peered with aching eyes through the tracery to the dead foliage of the withered beech . . . green leaves, black boughs, the trickery of light and shade, and beyond that nothing . . . till once again Jane felt her arm clutched and made out her father's scarcely-uttered whisper: 'To the right of the beech! Look high.' Ah, that was what had foxed them! She caught sight once again of that pale disc.

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He was not on the ground . . . he was in a tree . . . high up . . . out on a branch, he must be. The disc disappeared, and in that instant her father, still holding the Rod, had hurled himself across the Broad Walk with a noise of thundering horses and was crashing over twigs and dead leaves and dodging like a mad thing under the branches of the intervening trees.

Mr Hinnabel was too late. The distance was short, but it was complex. Half a dozen times he had to pull himself up in mid-career, within an inch of crashing head-on upon a tree. Behind and around the beech, the wood afforded infinite cover. Within a matter of seconds, or minutes (how could Mr Hinnabel know?) Hokey-Pokey had dropped from his branch and now stood ten feet, ten yards, even perhaps a hundred yards away. It was all one. He was completely hidden. For no more than a second Mr Hinnabel stood still at the foot of the supposed tree in his bewilderment. Then he began to beat the wood in all directions. Jane heard him plunging in the leaves like an elephant, as she in her turn, idiotically clasping the two straw hats to her breast, raced after him towards the beech-tree, dodging and darting under the impeding boughs.

'He's got away!' gasped Mr Hinnabel as she came up with him. 'Holding this held me up'; he motioned with the Rod, which he still grasped in his hand.

'Didn't it work?' Jane panted.

'We've got to see. We don't know what he's got away with. That was why I had to get him. He's gone off like lightning.' He was gazing wildly now into the branches stretching over them. 'Which of these is the tree?'

Which indeed was the tree? Which of the group of oaks, pin-pointed by the beech, had received the bronze from the thief's hands yesterday, and yielded it back today? Or not

yet yielded it? Or had yielded two bronzes? Or still held two bronzes, if the Rod had worked and the thief had fled before his business was accomplished? Wildly the possibilities chased themselves through Mr Hinnabel's brain, while his ear still strained to catch the breaking of a twig, the rustle of a leaf that would betray the thief's presence or the direction in which he had gone. To her amazement, Jane saw her father abruptly turn from gazing upward and begin striding back across the leaves the way they had come.

'What are you doing?' she called after him.

'I must get where I can see which branch it was . . . the one he was out on. He must have hidden it high. That must be it!' and in a moment her father was back again at her side, pointing to a branch which, rather strangely for an oak, stuck out almost at right-angles to the trunk, at least nine feet above the ground.

'Can you get up there?'

'Not from this side.' Already Mr Hinnabel had sized up the approach and seen that it was hopeless. 'You stay here, Jane. I shall have to try to get at it some other way.'

Having placed the Rod carefully against the trunk of the beech, he disappeared, and once again silence, more nerve-racking than the rush and tumult, descended on the wood. Jane stood there gazing upward in suspense, waiting for her father in some miraculous fashion to crawl round the trunk and out upon the branch. She waited so long that she began to fear he must have failed or stuck, when all at once she caught sight of a pair of dangling feet high up above her, being lowered from some invisible hold on to the branch. Catching her breath, she watched them feel for and find a footing, and in a moment her father was seated

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astride the branch above her, his hair on end. Jane waved to him; there was nothing else she could do to help him; with her heart in her mouth, she watched him work his way along the branch towards the trunk; cautiously then he got to his feet again, clasping the great pillar with his breast and outspread arms; now he was raising one arm; peering up into the sun she could not see clearly; but she could make out that, like a man feeling for the eggs in a nest, he was sliding one hand up into a niche, the junction of the next branch with the trunk.

'Got it!' It was a snap like the click of a lock.

A cry of ecstasy rose in Jane's throat, but before it could pass her lips it was drowned in a shout from the tree. 'There he goes! Catch, Jane! Stand clear!' There was a small swish as an object fell in the leaves at her feet, there was an earth-shaking swish as Mr Hinnabel followed it, grazing her as he passed, and plunged to his feet and was off through the wood before she realised that he had dropped like a plummet a sheer nine feet through the air and was still alive.

For a second time that afternoon she stood beneath a tree speechless with shock, while her father crashed into the distance. He had left her again, she was afraid, Hokey-Pokey was a thief and might kill him. She remembered how he had sat on the stump like an old man, though he had climbed like a boy or a monkey, and had jumped through the air like a man on a trapeze. Suddenly, in the midst, as it were, of the pictures that were crowding through her mind, she stopped dead; her ear remembered something—the little swish on the leaves—the Bronze!

Looking down, Jane, to her own surprise, heard herself laugh. It was as if a small earthquake had taken place at her feet. The dead leaves, lying deep, had been kicked and

stamped in all directions by Mr Hinnabel's fall and scrambling rise. Under the tinder-dry carpet of the wood, last year's wet leaves, and the leaves of the year before last, in caking layers, had been churned and turned up. Like looking for a needle in a hay-stack! But it was not as bad as that. The Bronze was solid, spiky and hard. She had not moved an inch since it fell. Still without shifting her feet she dropped on her knees and put her hands down caressingly on the small light leaves, with their beautiful oak-outline, before she set to work.

Jane was not Mr Hinnabel's daughter for nothing. As he with delicate fingers might have sifted some treasure from the sands of Egypt, so she unhurriedly began to sift the leaves. Still without moving, she felt about in a circle round her. Beyond a twig or two her fingers did not come upon anything hard. Sitting back on her heels she considered a little. It was evidently not quite so easy as she had thought. The leaves had been much disturbed. Perhaps she had better work to some kind of plan. She rose carefully to her feet again, and placed an upright twig between the toes of her shoes. She would work round that first, she decided. This she did, feeling systematically over a small circle, but without result. She must widen the circle, then. She set about it, marking her beginning with another twig, shifting the leaves always to the right and sifting them down to the earth. Still no result; it was becoming an unexpectedly long job. The doubts attendant upon any operation of this kind began to attack her. By her labours was she uncovering the Bronze, or was she more completely covering it up? Her anxiety began to rise; feeling that she must steady herself, she got to her feet, and at that moment Mr Hinnabel, the sound of his approach hidden by Jane's scuffling, came round from behind the tree.

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'I've missed him again. He's got away. They move like cats, these people.' Jane noticed however that he did not seem unduly distressed. 'Have you got the Bronze safe?'

'No.'

'No?'

'I haven't found it yet.'

Mr Hinnabel looked down at the work that had been going on at his feet and smiled.

'We must put a bit of method into it, Janey.'

'I am.'

'Do you remember where you were standing?'

'I've marked it with a twig.'

'Good girl.' Her father picked up the Bee-keeper from the base of the tree and hung it on the twig. 'That'll prevent my stamping it down.' He took his stand as near to the hat as possible, and peered up searchingly into the branches, shading his eyes with his hand.

'Yes. That'd be about it. It didn't hit you, I suppose, as it fell?'

'You hit me . . . pretty nearly.'

Mr Hinnabel laughed. 'I was in a hurry. But you heard it, didn't you, on the leaves?'

'Oh, yes. A little swish.'

'Well, then, let's think a bit.' Mr Hinnabel confidently surveyed the site.

An hour later they were still searching, or Mr Hinnabel had at that moment straightened his back and ceased to search. A wide circle round the tree had been swept completely clear of leaves. Mr Hinnabel had even gone so far as to construct a pair of besoms or twig-brooms for greater thoroughness. There was no doubt that they had been thorough. There was also no doubt, not the remotest shadow of doubt, upon another point.

The Bronze had disappeared.

Mr Hinnabel lowered himself stiffly to the ground, and sitting with his back against the trunk of the oak, stretched out his legs.

‘Sit down, Janey.’

Jane took no notice. ‘It’s impossible! that’s what it is, impossible!’ she kept repeating, in a loud, unsteady voice.

Mr Hinnabel raised his hand and gently pulled her down to the ground beside him. They stared before them at the Bee-keeper on its twig, standing like a low-growing, mocking scarecrow in the midst of the barren field.

‘Do you know what I think?’

Jane hardly cared what he thought, but as he waited, she turned her head a fraction his way.

‘The Rod must have doubled the bronze in the tree. Then we didn’t know whether he had taken both or none, or one, and if one, which it was he had taken. But his is the real one.’

‘What do you mean? Aren’t they both real? They’re exactly the same, aren’t they?’

‘They look the same, they feel the same, I’ll swear they *are* the same. But ours is gone.’

‘How *could* it?’

‘Magic for magic, some might say. They told me the Bronze was a magic thing, too.’

Far away in the wood a cuckoo shouted and shouted, loud-voiced and unlovable, as cuckoos are in summer.

With a sharp movement Jane twisted over and lay on her face.

‘Stop that bird! Stop it!’ she cried, passionately beating the earth beside her with her fists.

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They dragged their way home without speaking, and without speaking Mrs Hinnabel received them, pale, exhausted, battered, and Jane with the hem of her dress hanging loose where she had trod on it half a dozen times on rising from her knees.

'Give Jane some tea,' said Mr Hinnabel briefly to his wife. Making no secret of it, he opened his coat, undid the Rod from its attachment, and holding it in his hand, mounted slowly to his study upstairs. In ten minutes Mrs Hinnabel entered, carrying a tray of tea for him. She poured it out; it was fine fragrant tea and she had brought him one of the fine best cups. Mr Hinnabel drank thirstily and she filled the cup again. When he had drained it a second time, he said, 'I wanted that.'

'Do you feel better?'

'Yes. I suppose Jane's told you what's gone on this afternoon.'

'More or less. She wasn't very lucid and I wanted her to have her tea.'

'How is she feeling?'

'She'll be all right.'

Mr Hinnabel leaned back in his armchair and took out his pipe. When he had slowly filled it and drawn a few puffs, he said: 'At least we're on the track.'

'But it's horrible, Hokey-Pokey being the thief. He always seemed such a decent little man.'

'He may be, according to his lights . . . which are certainly not our lights. Where there's a crime, there's a motive, a compelling reason for it, the experts say. What's the little man's motive in stealing my Bronze? That's the question. If times are hard for ice-cream men and he's gotta da new baby and he's feeling the pinch, why my Bronze? Why not a couple of nice, ugly, valuable diamond rings?'

If not much easier to come by, at least considerably easier to dispose of, I should have said. But I don't believe times *are* hard for ice-cream men. Jane's report of the Sunday-best—and on Saturday, mark you—makes it sound as though times are rather festive. So I shouldn't say gain was the motive, at least in the money way. I daresay he doesn't even know the thing's value. Why should that little man steal my Bronze? How does he come to be connected with it? There's more in it than meets the eye, much more. I'm convinced we haven't scratched the surface of it yet.'

'It was clever of you to be on to it.'

'Oh, well . . . another Italian . . . who'd left the neighbourhood, and was hanging about in a wood. Poor Italians don't normally seek solitude in woods. They seek it at street corners, surrounded by ten thousand of their fellow-men. Is it known, by the way, what his name is, our friend? Other than Hokey-Pokey, I mean.'

'His name's Giuseppe Nica. It was painted between two most beautiful curly mermaids, on his cart.'

'Nica . . . might be Sicilian,' Mr Hinnabel murmured.

'The wood still puzzles me,' went on Mrs Hinnabel. 'It seems such a distant and elaborate way of hiding such a small thing. And the branch so high up. You'd think there'd be a thousand places in a wood just as safe without being so difficult to get at in a hurry.'

'I think the actual hiding-place may be chance,' her husband answered. 'I understand why it was there, or thereabouts. If you hide a thing in a wood you've got to be able to find it again. One tree is very like another, especially, I'd say, to Hokey-Pokey, who'd probably never been in Mill Wood before in his life. The dead beech (did Jane tell you there was a dead beech?) marked the spot. You could be

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sure of finding it again. The tree to the right of the dead beech, then. Where in the tree? As it happens there isn't a suitable crack or cranny near the ground, but that looks a good one, that one high up . . . You don't want to start changing your mind at this stage . . . you don't want to hang about for too long, and you're a quick and cat-like little man . . . you can climb. That, I think, might explain why it was hidden in that actual fork. But why the wood, as you say? I don't understand that either.' His gaze moved across the room to where the Rod hung on its two nails against the side of the cupboard. Drawing on his pipe, he looked at it fixedly for a long time. 'And the wood,' he added, 'is the least part of what I don't understand.'

'What made you take it with you?' Mrs Hinnabel asked, her eye following his and resting also on the Rod.

'No real reason. Just a dim notion of being thankful for any help I thought I might be able to get. And I thought I'd got it, too!' cried Mr Hinnabel, starting to his feet and beginning to pace the carpet. 'I had my hand on the Bronze. I held it. I'd know the feel of it blind-folded in the dark. And when I came back it was gone.'

'That's the frightening part. You think the Rod worked?'

'Oh, yes. Clearly it worked. But in a new way. When I went after Hokey-Pokey the first time I knew nothing . . . only that he was making off and that I'd attempted to double the Bronze. I didn't know whether he was making off full- or empty-handed, or whether I *had* doubled the Bronze. When I put my hand on the Bronze in the tree I still didn't know. I simply thought I'd recovered it, and catching a glimpse of him from up there, I thought I might catch the thief as well. Now I know that I *did* double it, and that he was not empty-handed. In fact, that he'd

got the real Bronze, and ours was a kind of vanishing twin.'

'But *how* did it vanish? And why?'

'These are the questions we can't answer.'

'You say you searched to the absolute limits of sense or possibility?'

'We searched till even Jane was satisfied—or hopeless. It comes to the same thing.'

'But we thought the Rod worked for *us*.'

'It did. I believe it does. I believe it may again. But it may have its limits, or its own ways.'

'You don't think that, as we know the thief, or think we know him, we ought to get in other help?'

'It may come to that. I can't keep the thing dark for ever. But I'd like to, as long as I can.' His eye moved to the calendar on his desk, informing him for the twentieth time that the loss had occurred on Tuesday and that it was now Sunday. Five days. And he added, half below his breath, 'So long as it isn't *too* long.'



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JOS WAITED at the gate for Jane to come up with her on the way to school next morning. Jane was well brushed and combed and plaited; her frock was clean; her sandals shone. In dress at least she did not resemble the child who had dragged home yesterday in the heat of the late afternoon. All the same, she did not bear the appearance of having spent a cheerful and reviving week-end.

‘Did you do anything nice yesterday?’ Jos asked her as they went along.

‘No!’ It came out almost fiercely. Jos glanced with curiosity at her companion’s pale face.

‘What *did* you do?’

‘Went a walk.’

‘A walk!’ This was not the way the Luxtons, with their tennis-courts and gleaming motor-cars, spent Sunday afternoon. ‘Who with?’

‘With Father.’

‘Oh.’ As a maker of dolls’-houses, Mr Hinnabel might have his points, but his pure and Spartan ideas of recreation were somewhat out-of-date.

‘Jolly hot, wasn’t it?’

‘It was awful.’

Again Jos glanced at her curiously.

Warned by the glance, Jane made an effort to steer the conversation away from her father and his affairs.

'What did *you* do?' she asked somewhat bitterly.

'Oh, nothing very special. It was so hot. The Fosters came over; they've just got back from Paris. We played a bit of tennis and all had tea in the garden . . . Strawberries.' The kind of strawberry-tea the Luxtons had in the garden when the Fosters came over spread itself out before Jane's eyes. The envy she was feeling was, she knew, exactly what Jos intended her to feel. 'Mrs Foster,' Jos went on, 'brought me back the sweetest little beaded gold French bag.'

'Beaded?' Jane had to ask in spite of herself.

'Yes. All over. It's for evening, of course. I shall have to keep it till I'm older.'

Jane had an extraordinary feeling that she might be going to cry. She felt she passionately hated Mrs Foster. She twisted away from Jos quickly at the school gates. Monday morning was horrible enough anyway, with the return to slavery and the fact that the first lesson was arithmetic, for which they were supposed to have gained a clear head during the week-end. This morning Jane could not do a single sum that was put up on the board, not even one of the kind that she had been certain last week that she had mastered. The clean page at which she had opened her note-book was soon scored over with crossings-out, and horrible to see. By the end of the first lesson she felt already that awful hopelessness and weariness with school that overcame her usually towards the end of the week.

As she turned out of the town that afternoon on her way home, she was overtaken by Francis, moodily pushing his bicycle. To her surprise he fell into step at her side.

'Your bike punctured?'

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'Yes, the beastly thing.'

'Everything's beastly.'

'Have you still not got over yesterday afternoon?'

'I've got over it. It's not that. But we haven't got the Bronze. It's still lost.'

'I think Father ought to call in the Police.'

'He won't do that.'

'Why won't he? That's what they're for. And now we've got a clue, they'll have ways of finding it.'

'Would Hokey-Pokey have to go to prison?'

'Of course. And he deserves to, jolly well. Is that what's stopping him?'

'Mother says it'd be a bad thing for him if he called in the Police. I asked her.'

'What do you mean, a bad thing?'

'He mustn't let people know he loses things ... the Museum's things. It'd be bad for him.'

'It's not his fault,' said Francis impatiently. 'Everybody loses things when they get stolen. The point is, to get it back. This week's been absolutely awful. It can't go on like this for ever.'

They continued in an unfriendly silence, doggedly covering the painful distance between themselves and tea, and turned at last into their own road.

'Don't do that, Francis!' In his irritation he was kicking before him as he walked a small object that his toe had encountered on the gravel. A crooked kick had brought it under Jane's feet.

'What is that you're kicking?'

It had looked like a simple bit of coloured cardboard, but now Jane saw that it was not. She stooped down and picked up the little object. 'What is it?'

Francis held out his hand for it. 'Let's see.'



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The thing might in fact have been no more than an odd bit of coloured cardboard, except that in the hand it turned out to be a tiny coloured cardboard-box, about an inch and a half square and no more than a quarter of an inch deep. To one shallow side was gummed a strip of sandpaper, which gave a clue to the object's use.

'It's some kind of match-box,' Francis said. The box did not push open like an ordinary match-box, but a tiny tab drew out the inner part, like a drawer.

'Rather a sweet little box,' Jane said, without much interest. 'Nothing in it, is there?'

'No matches.' Francis drew the little drawer right out, as it seemed to be sticking. What was holding it up turned out to be a crushed cigarette-end.

'Ugh,' said Jane, wrinkling her nose at the nasty little object. 'Throw it away.'

Francis shook the box between finger and thumb, preparatory to throwing it away; then something seemed to make him change his mind. He looked at it again more closely, and finally put it in his pocket.

'Are you going to keep it?' Jane asked, surprised.

'Might as well.'

That night on his way up to bed, Francis went into his father's study, where Mr Hinnabel, blind and deaf to the beauties of the June evening and the crying needs of the garden, was sitting wrapped in silence and tobacco-smoke, as he had sat every evening for the past week. Scarcely liking to break in on him, Francis diffidently took the little box out of his pocket and laid it on the blotting-paper on the desk.

'This couldn't be anything, I suppose?'

Mr Hinnabel gazed at the little box, still puffing. Then with his fine, careful fingers he took hold of it and pulled the little drawer open.

‘Where did you find it?’

‘Near the corner. I just thought I’d bring it home in case it might be in the picture.’

‘Quite right,’ said Mr Hinnabel, bemusedly pulling the little drawer in and out. ‘Thanks very much.’

As no more seemed to be forthcoming, Francis withdrew to bed. No sooner had he closed the door than his father rose, and walking to the other side of the room, laid down his pipe in an ash-tray. Returning to his desk, he pulled open the tiny box once more and bent his head until he had positively laid his nose in the drawer. Francis, he judged, might have found such an action rather odd. But when he raised his head, the light in his eye suggested that his odd action might have told him something.

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At about half-past eleven the next morning, Mr Hinnabel and two of his colleagues at the Museum were drinking coffee in the modest little café in the neighbourhood that they frequented. Very much as Francis had done the night before, Mr Hinnabel drew the little box out of his pocket, and silently laid it on the table in front of one of his companions. Those who knew Mr Hinnabel in his Askham clothes might have found him rather hard to recognise at this moment, for he wore a neat dark suit, black shoes, a collar, and a dark tie. In fact, as there was not a touch of fancy-dress about him anywhere, he gave a strong impression of being in fancy-dress. His companions were similarly attired, but the one before whom Mr Hinnabel had laid the box was the kind of man who, even in a dark suit, could never succeed in looking neat. One of his shoe-laces was loose, his tie was slightly crooked, his coat needed a brush. Above his enormous forehead, though

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he was still a young man, the hair was already thin and what there was of it was wild and downy, like a baby's. He looked down at the little object laid before him and puffed at his pipe in silence. Then he pulled open the box and, seeing its contents, removed his pipe from his mouth and pushed it as far away as possible, as Mr Hinnabel had done, and held the crushed cigarette-end to his nose.

'French or Italian,' he said finally, replacing it. 'The box Italian.'

Mr Hinnabel waited to see if he would add anything, but he asked instead, 'What's the question?'

'Where does it come from?'

'Milan, Rome, Messina . . . anywhere in the long length of Italy.'

'Where in London? That's the question, Tom.'

Replacing his pipe, Tom considered deeply. 'There's a little shop in the Euston Road where they sell every known and unknown kind of tobacco. But I'm no cigarette-smoker. Roger try.'

Mr Hinnabel pushed the little box across the table, and Roger in his turn raised it to his nose.

'Not French,' he said after a moment. 'That leaves Italian.'

'What kind?'

Roger thoughtfully sniffed again. 'Not one of the commoner ones.'

'So I thought,' Mr Hinnabel said.

'Colletti's,' pronounced Roger finally. 'I should try Colletti's in Soho.'

'Where in Soho?'

'Havelock Street. Off Cyprus Street. It's not more than an alley, really, with a little court at the end.'

'Is there a Colletti?'

'Yes. Nice old chap. Family business. Was the stub in the box?'

'Yes,' Mr Hinnabel replied.

'That mean anything?'

'Only, I suppose, that the smoker was smoking indoors and being unusually tidy and careful. They don't usually worry where they throw cigarette-ends.'

Roger pushed the box back to its owner.

'Yes. Colletti's 'd be my guess.'

Passing the little box from hand to hand intently and speaking in brief, clipped sentences the three grown men had the appearance of playing a game, some game which they were regularly accustomed to play together. And such a guess was not entirely wide of the mark. Their work required them to be able to size up ancient objects, in Tom's case, coins, and in Roger's case, pottery . . . and to make a good guess, in fact the best possible guess, as to when they were made and where they came from. They had to develop some of the powers of the detective, and they often played the game of using these powers, as it were, out of school. They tested each other in sporting fashion, sometimes for fun, and sometimes, as now, for a purpose: but Mr Hinnabel knew that if either of his friends suspected that he had a purpose, neither of them would dream of inquiring what it was. The three of them were old comrades in arms; they understood each other; or rather they understood each other up to a point; for whereas Mr Hinnabel, as has been said, hated machines of every kind as much as he loved boats, Tom Arber was morbidly afraid of getting his feet wet and was a genius with engines. Roger Fiske, for his part, thought both these tastes ridiculous and devoted every spare half-hour he had to watching birds.

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Glancing at the café clock, Mr Hinnabel put the little box back in his pocket and rose to his feet.

'Time's up,' he said.

He paid the bill and together they strolled back to their work.

A cigarette, which might have been smoked by Hokey-Pokey, might have been bought in Havelock Street, Soho. By so much was he the wiser. He turned it over in his mind. Where did that lead to? Where it would lead to ultimately, if anywhere, he could not tell, but certainly for the moment, it seemed to lead him to Soho.

Evening accordingly found Mr Hinnabel in Soho, in the middle of London's most crowded foreign quarter. The shops were just closing, and the pavements were thronged with people emerging from them or going home from work, or taking the evening air and talking every language from Chinese to Estonian. Cyprus Street was one of the larger streets of the area, named long ago, like Greek Street and Poland Street, after the native lands the foreigners had left. Mr Hinnabel knew it well. It was a market-street and by day was packed with stalls. Now the market-men and market-women were closing down. Canopies of bright stuffs were being hauled in from overhead and briskly folded, dingy cloths were being flung over arrays of ribbons and buttons and laces, tomatoes and gooseberries which did not look like living through the night were tossed to the ground to increase the mess underfoot. Stalls were being trundled off, with small respect for the walkers who had taken refuge in the road from the impassable pavements. Every move the market-people made was accompanied by much shouting and some swearing. A hot and busy summer day was over and the whole world was intent on getting shut of work.

Mr Hinnabel, however, felt no objection to the jostling as he slowly made his way along, looking for Havelock Street. The crush suited him nicely. He felt he would have passed unnoticed at this moment if he had started a fire. Half-way down Cyprus Street he caught sight of what he was looking for: *Havelock Street*, written high in a narrow opening on the other side of the road.

From his viewpoint he saw at once that it was not a street of shops, but an ancient alley, of which a few remained in this neighbourhood. There was just one shop which could be said to be fairly in Havelock Street, tacked on to a gaudy dress-shop at the corner. It was a newspaper-shop, and no doubt also a tobacconist's, for over it, sure enough, Mr Hinnabel could read the name 'Colletti', painted in white letters on a green board. As he crossed the road and joined a queue of men and women presumably buying cigarettes and evening papers, his heart began to sink. The shop was totally unlike anything he had expected, though he had not known what to expect, except that hopeful imagination had pictured something secluded and dark, presided over by an old man like a cobbler or a watchmaker (perhaps even wearing a skull-cap) who would somehow put him on the track of what he wanted to know. As the queue moved up and he approached the place of custom, his heart sank farther. The shop could not be entered, but was arranged like a bookstall, and within it sat or stood a stout young woman in pink, like an overblown rose, embowered on all sides by magazines, papers, courses in foreign languages, and hanging lines of cheap, bright, varnished books. Above, almost touching her hair, hung maps and guides and, above those, cards of tap-washers and india-rubber teapot-spouts. It was not, in fact, Mr Hinnabel's kind of shop. Tobacco was evi-

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dently part of the stock, for packets of ordinary English cigarettes, as well as newspapers, were being pushed across and change gathered up with remarkable speed and precision. In fact, the queue was being dealt with in exactly the same way as an experienced ticket-clerk deals with a rush-hour queue at a railway station. Mr Hinnabel found himself moving up quickly, too quickly. He was not prepared for the situation and it daunted him. He found himself gazing into a pair of brown eyes under thick black eyebrows.

'The *Mercury*,' he said hastily, mentioning the name of the first evening paper that came into his head.

It was slapped down in front of him. He had to think quickly. The brown eyes were velvety (this, he guessed, would be a grand-daughter of old Colletti, doing her part in the family business) but at this moment they told him unmistakably to get on or to get out.

'I believe you sell Italian cigarettes . . . ' he began.

Without speaking the pink rose leaned far back to reach for something, and planked down a packet of cigarettes on the folded newspaper. Mr Hinnabel saw at a glance that they were French.

'So sorry,' he mumbled desperately, 'I wanted Italian.'

With an air that said plainly 'What's the difference?' the rose made the same backward-bending movement and planked down another packet . . . ten of the cigarettes most generally smoked over the length and breadth of Italy. This person was not a regular customer, she did not know his tastes or preferences, it was not a good moment for him to be difficult to please. Before Mr Hinnabel had so much as produced the money she was already gazing past him at the next customer. Like the rest of the toilers in Cyprus Street, she had clearly had a long day,

which went on half-an-hour longer than other people's, and she too intended to get shut of work as soon as possible. There was nothing for Mr Hinnabel to do but gather up his change and his packet and squeeze his way out. He was floored.

Desiring now only to avoid the throng and collect himself, he turned inwards down Havelock Street, which, when he had proceeded six yards along it, seemed by contrast as quiet as the bottom of the sea. He saw that it was, as Roger Fiske had said, a tiny street, no more than an ancient, deserted alley, widening into a minute court at the end. Mr Hinnabel paced as far as he could go, then turned and paced back. He noticed that the place smelt overpoweringly of fish, and saw that on the pavement opposite him an empty fish-barrow was parked against a piece of blind wall, having lately been wheeled in, he concluded, from the market. As he gazed, a yellow cat slunk swiftly down the steps of the house by which he stood, streaked across the road, and leaped passionately on to the barrow. Hoping that it would find a scrap or two on the apparently bare boards, Mr Hinnabel walked on. He saw now that he was passing a notice 'House for Sale' and paused, out of habit, to see what kind of a house it might be. A most beautiful little house, his eyes told him at once, dilapidated and filthy, like its neighbours, but quite perfect of its kind. He raised his eyes to the upper storeys, and at that moment saw a slight movement at a top window of the house next door and caught a glimpse of a grey-headed old woman withdrawing behind a curtain. Keeping an eye on her cat, Mr Hinnabel supposed. He paced to the bottom once more and again, on his way back, looked up and down the little empty house. Again there was the glimpse of that grim old face withdrawing

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behind its curtain next door. Sauntering moodily back into Cyprus Street, Mr Hinnabel reflected that in the natural way strangers must be exceedingly rare in the little court, and that the old lady was inspecting any person who might be inspecting the house next door and so stand a remote chance of becoming her neighbour.

Next morning saw Mr Hinnabel again at the modest café near the Museum with his two friends. They ordered their coffee, and again Mr Hinnabel pushed the little match-box with the cigarette-stub inside over to Roger Fiske, then laid a loosely-packed cigarette, bearing no mark, beside it. His action was understood. Roger Fiske sniffed the cigarette and the cigarette-stub in turn.

'This is an ordinary *Cairo*,' he said at last, naming the brand of the cigarette. He appeared somewhat surprised.

'That's not it, then?'

'No. You know, I don't think it *is* one of the commoner kinds.' Mr Hinnabel laughed shortly. 'I don't doubt you, Roger,' he said. He returned the cigarette and the box to his pocket in silence. He had not supposed for a moment that the stub *was* a *Cairo*. But the *Cairo* was all he had been able to get and he thought he might as well put it to the test. Time was getting short and he was getting nowhere. He decided that he must think of some other way of tackling his problem.

A simple change of plan, it occurred to him, would be to pay a visit to Colletti's in his luncheon hour. He might perhaps find the old man in charge, or the rose might be in a more forthcoming mood, for *some* of the inhabitants of Cyprus Street, he reflected grimly, must go indoors and eat; they could not all be everlastingly parading and queueing up in the streets.

Emerging hurriedly into Cyprus Street two hours

later, Mr Hinnabel discovered that his guess concerning the eating habits of the inhabitants had been right. But he had not guessed right enough. *All* the inhabitants of Cyprus Street clearly were eating; there was no sign of the market; the place was like a tomb. He supposed that as there appeared to be no market on a Wednesday, the street made it a half-holiday and shut up shop. Standing on the pavement opposite, he saw that Colletti's was no exception. Wooden shutters closely covered its front. At the windows of the upper storeys, Mr Hinnabel observed fresh muslin curtains, and geraniums and petunias richly abloom. Behind these, he would wager, the Colletti family was at that moment eating too, with old Colletti at the head of the table, sucking up macaroni, a venerable figure with a napkin round his neck. Mr Hinnabel all but ground his teeth. He was full of courage and he was full of cunning. The information he was seeking was, on the face of it, neither dangerous nor difficult to obtain: simply, did Colletti sell the kind of cigarettes that Hokey-Pokey smoked, or that the man smoked who had thrown away the match-box at Askham? If the answer was yes, from there Mr Hinnabel might get somewhere. But if there was no answer he could not get anywhere at all. Could it be made to seem a natural act for a stranger to burst in upon the Colletti family at its dinner and ask questions? Mr Hinnabel tried the scene over every way and it could not be made to seem a natural act. However he rehearsed it, it seemed to him to be an act that would shut up the wary and suspicious foreigners like clams. And he had lost another day.

Standing in a café, Mr Hinnabel ate an unappetising sandwich and went back to his work. He longed to get a little counsel—Roger's—on his problem. He longed, in

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fact, to say to Roger, 'You know the old man Colletti. When do you think I shall find him in his shop?' But he resisted the temptation. He was convinced that nobody, and particularly nobody connected with the Museum, must become involved, even remotely, in the affair of the Bronze.

Lying in bed that night, he tried to shelve his anxiety, and work out what the next logical step must be towards finding the old man, and he decided that he would try the next afternoon at about four o'clock. His reasoning was that that would be a quiet time. The old man, in the way of Southerners, would most likely take a *siesta* or midday-rest in the hot weather, and then perhaps get up and occupy himself for a couple of hours in the shop. Devoutly, almost frantically, Mr Hinnabel hoped that his reasoning would prove correct.

Thursday afternoon at four o'clock found Cyprus Street busy, but in a sedate and steady way. Foreign wives were shopping for the evening meal, with a sharp eye on the quality of their purchases, foreign husbands were mostly at their work and out of sight. Loungers and passers-by were in no more than moderate numbers. From his vantage-point on the pavement opposite, Mr Hinnabel saw little business going forward at Colletti's. People paused every now and then to gaze at the gaudy books and papers without buying; an occasional client stopped for a packet of cigarettes. From where he stood Mr Hinnabel could not see what hand produced them. There was no flash of pink; that much he could vouch for. Then, lest his heart should beat too high with hope, he warned himself that the rose might still be in her bower, but wearing a dark dress. He walked a little way back along Cyprus Street, crossed the road, and bore down

slowly on the corner, where he gazed raptly in the windows of the dress-shop, hoping to give the impression of a man torn by the necessity of choosing between a summer suit of purple flannel and a white evening-dress patterned with monstrous red balloons as a present for his wife. He sidled round the corner, still gazing inward. Out of the tail of his eye he observed a negro clergyman approach the neighbouring wall of books. There was some parley, and then a huge but delicate black hand was raised to take a little parcel. Mr Hinnabel stepped back a pace on the pavement as though to see some item in the window to better advantage. The hand that held the parcel at the other end was neither feminine nor white. It was a man's brown hand, also delicate, and small and old. The watcher knew that he had found the person whom he sought.

Now such cleverness and cunning as Mr Hinnabel possessed could have a chance to work. He approached the bookshop frankly and addressed the owner.

'Have you a good map of London?'

An envelope was pulled down from overhead and silently offered for his inspection.

'May I open it?' he asked pleasantly.

'With pleasure.' Colletti smiled. He was a peaceable little brown old man, not wearing a skull cap, but with a natural cap of short, upstanding strong white hair.

Mr Hinnabel unfolded the map and studied it. 'Ah . . . I didn't really need all this . . .'

Stretching up a brown hand, the old man deftly refolded the great sheet.

'Da map of da centre?'

A second envelope was pulled down and neatly flipped open.

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'Ah . . . thank you . . . that's better . . . that's splendid . . .'

Mr Hinnabel pored over the map delightedly. 'London's a large place.'

'For me too large.'

'For all of us too large.'

'But I no trouble. Da young man, da young miss . . . he gotta run about . . . in autobus, in metro, in aeroplano . . . but I no trouble . . . my good glass wine . . . my good cup coffee . . . all my friend . . . all my customer . . .' he waved his hand in a circular gesture round the dimness of Havelock Street, to show that everything a man could need or desire was forthcoming from this corner.

'Yes, you're in the heart of it,' Mr Hinnabel agreed warmly. 'And very nice it is. I daresay you've been here a long time?'

'Fifty year,' said the old man with satisfaction. And he added, still with satisfaction, 'And I still spikka da English very bad.'

'Fifty years!' Mr Hinnabel's voice was full of surprise and deference. 'Why, you must almost have forgotten Italy.'

The old man chuckled and again made a circular gesture round the quarter. 'Here too is Eettaly. All my countrymen . . .'

Mr Hinnabel felt his heart give a slight leap. 'At last!' a voice seemed to say in his head.

'That's true,' he said, keeping his own voice steady. 'All Italian . . . the good Italian coffee, the good Italian wine. I know them well. I often come to drink them.'

Feverishly in his mind, as he spoke, he was willing the old man to say something, willing it with such vehemence it seemed that the thought must be shouting itself aloud.

The wine, the coffee . . . Move on to the next item! Follow it up! Follow it up naturally! Fascinated, as though gazing at a miracle he had performed by his own powers, Mr Hinnabel watched the old man rise from what was seen to be a stool, and stepping backward, reach something from a shelf above his head. He laid it down between them, still smiling, like a person bringing some matter to a neat conclusion,

‘And da good Italian cigarette,’ he said.

They were, as Mr Hinnabel saw at a glance, the inevitable *Cairo* once again. But no matter.

‘Ah, *Cairo*,’ he said pleasantly, in the tone of one who recognises some well-known thing or person with a faint amusement and no very great delight.

‘You know?’

‘Oh yes, I know. I must have smoked hundreds of them in my time.’

‘You like?’

‘Oh yes, I like . . .’ Again, from the tolerant amusement in his voice it was clear that the thing in question could not rouse *very* great enthusiasm in anybody.

Old Colletti appeared to be puzzled. Then, without a word, he removed the packet of *Cairo* and reaching to his unseen shelf substituted another packet, with the air of a person accepting the necessity to play a higher card.

Mr Hinnabel turned the packet over. It was called *Bandiera*, he noticed, and the wrapper was red, white, and green, like the national flag. He had never seen one of the kind before, although, unlike Roger Fiske, he was no authority on brands of tobacco. Playing for time, he sniffed the cigarettes, hoping that that was really what the experts did, and laid them down again.

‘Ah, yes, that’s better, that seems to bring back Rome

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to me,' he murmured, still with the air of a customer who is becoming more hopeful, but does not quite see satisfaction yet.

Old Colletti gave him a keen look. Without a word he reached down from his hidden source one, two, three packets, all of different kinds, placing them beside *Bandiera* in a row.

'Four aces!' his expression seemed to say.

Mr Hinnabel felt that he dared not persist any farther. Nor was he without hope that Colletti had now showed him his entire stock.

'Quite a selection,' he murmured, as though the ticklish customer was willing to consider being pleased at last. With his left hand he began negligently piling the four packets of cigarettes one on top of the other. A slightly hurt look came into the old man's eyes.

'You no want?'

'Oh, yes,' answered Mr Hinnabel mildly. He pushed the little heap across.

'You takka da lot?'

'A little present,' murmured the purchaser vaguely, and without perfect accuracy, his mind groping frantically for some means of approaching his next point. 'That is if you can spare them,' he added.

Colletti shrugged his shoulders, as if to suggest that he was a shopkeeper and if the goods were sold, they were sold. Mr Hinnabel felt slowly for his wallet. 'Do you sell a lot of them?' he ventured to ask.

Colletti shrugged his shoulders and again sketched his circular gesture. 'My friends . . . they like . . .'

'Ah, I understand.' Mr Hinnabel smiled knowingly. 'You get the wine from them . . . they get the cigarettes from you.'

'Yes. Da goodda Chianti, da good Albano,' (he named two wines) 'Mr Russo, he sell, Mr Finzi, he sell . . . very good wine. Make strong, make happy, make singa da music . . . Mr Cavallaro, he marry my daughter . . .' he jerked his head in the direction of Cyprus Street. 'Mr Tarrascone . . .' this time the gesture was in the direction of the alley.

Mr Hinnabel gave a violent start. With the slender clue of the cigarette-stub he hoped to find the whereabouts of Hokey-Pokey. Somebody had smoked a foreign cigarette in Askham and thrown the end away. It looked as though it might have been his man. At any rate, the clue, worthy or worthless, had to be followed up. No experienced criminal would have thrown away a cigarette-stub in a tell-tale box, but Hokey-Pokey was not an experienced criminal. He was an ice-cream seller (in winter probably a hot-roast-chestnut seller or an artists' model). Such a decent little man he always seemed, as Mrs Hinnabel had said. But for some reason he had badly needed an Etruscan bronze, and he had come to Askham to steal it. (How he knew its whereabouts was still uncertain, except that he had once been a native of Askham and knew the Hinnabels.) But the fact remained that he *had* stolen the bronze, and then, strangest of all, he had hidden it in a tree. That seemed to show that he had nowhere to hide it in Askham and had not wished to take it home. But he had been startled, like a bird on its nest, by his meeting in the wood with one of the Hinnabels, and had then decided, presumably, that he must not be parted from his treasure, that he must keep it with him—that he must in fact take it home. And where was home? That, Mr Hinnabel hoped, the cigarette-end might help him to discover, and Islinstin and Willisdin, poles apart, he had

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dismissed as two red herrings drawn across the track. Where had the cigarette been bought? Soho was Roger's guess. And if Soho, the chances were that the purchaser did not live very far away. Was such a cigarette sold in Soho? Now at last Mr Hinnabel had some hopes of getting an answer to that question. He could not get an answer on the spot, but meanwhile let the old man talk. Let him talk all he would. Guide him with featherweight touches to the subject of his friends and customers and fellow-countrymen, and pray that he would drop a hint, if the gods were kind, even a name . . . Mister Russo, Mister Finzi, Mister Cavallero. . . . With his ears stretched like a hare's, Mr Hinnabel was praying for the next name to be Mister Nica; but, waving towards the alley, 'Mister Tarrascone' had been what the old man said. It was not a name one could forget, and Mr Hinnabel had not forgotten it. It was the name, not of the man who had stolen the Bronze, but of the man who had brought it to him at the Museum.

Trusting that he had not betrayed anything, Mr Hinnabel pulled himself together, but no more was forthcoming from the old man. Perhaps he felt that he had talked enough. On being handed not only the cigarettes but a large envelope, the customer gazed for a moment uncomprehendingly. Oh, yes, of course . . . the map. The brown old man was smiling and holding out his hand, and Mr Hinnabel shook it warmly, feeling that he had made a friend. So Tarrascone lived in Havelock Street. What was the significance of that? For the moment he could see none, but something warned him that this was not the time idly to show himself there again. He thrust the map slowly into his pocket and sauntered down the market. Havelock Street had not been the address the man

Tarrascone had given him to put on the receipt, but that explained itself. By trade he was a marble-cutter, dealing in tombstones and garden ornaments, and he had given the address of his mason's yard. Actually, it was not half-a-mile away. Mr Hinnabel had satisfied himself that it existed and belonged to Tarrascone before he had made the purchase.

As he walked away from Havelock Street, its appearance kept returning to his inner eye . . . the deserted alley, widening to the tiny court, the little empty house, filthy but beautiful, with its board *For Sale*, the fish-barrow, the streaking yellow cat. A curtain moved stealthily at a window in his mind's picture. An old face was drawn quickly in. Strange how he remembered it from that glimpse . . . it was so unsmiling it was almost evil . . hard as flint. Witches had cats, and cats had witches Why did he dwell on it? What was he groping for? Then all at once it came to him. The man Tarrascone had let fall that he had a grandmother. It was when he was insisting that he was the head of the family, since his father was dead, and that he had the authority. And the grandmother had been unwilling for the Bronze to go.

As he continued in the direction of his work, Mr Hinnabel made an effort to get his thoughts clear. The anxiety that had hung over him since the evening of the theft . . . he could not rid himself of that . . . but he tried to ignore it and simply consider the problem by itself. Stumbling upon the home and the family of the man who had brought him the Bronze was strange, but it did not necessarily affect the case. Just possibly it was not even the man, though Mr Hinnabel doubted that there were many of that name in London, or that they would not all be of one clan.

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His only real clue remained the cigarette-end, and the urgent thing, the only positive thing he could do to help himself was to discover where it had been bought. Perhaps there might be a chance of discovering that tonight. He quickened his pace, deciding to board the first bus going in his direction, but it was five o'clock, and the evening crowds were beginning to pour into the streets. When he reached the Museum at last he made for Roger's office, but it was already empty. Tomorrow then; he must wait again; till then he could not know whether or not he had achieved anything. On yet another evening Mr Hinnabel took his way home with his anxiety, his puzzlement, his impatience, and his ray of hope, to wait as best he might.



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TO FRANCIS, on that same evening, waiting, or any more waiting, had abruptly become unendurable.

'There's only one place to try,' he said, having crossed the grass to intercept Jane by the shrubbery and planted himself squarely in her path. He spoke as if continuing an uninterrupted train of thought, which was exactly what he did.

Jane simply stood still and raised her eyes, waiting for him to go on.

'The wood again.'

'Mill Wood?'

'Yes. The Bronze was there, last Sunday—that at least we do know. You've never told me properly what happened, but father threw it to you and it dropped, and you didn't find it. It must still be there.'

'It isn't. We searched.'

'I know you did. But you might have missed it. It's a small thing, and a wood's a large place.'

'It isn't there. I'm certain. We didn't search just anyhow. We searched how people really search.'

'All the same, you might have missed it. It might have hit a branch and glanced off. We've got to look again.'

'I'm not.'

'What? Won't you come?'

'No,' said Jane slowly. 'The wood's horrible. I've had enough of it. And the Bronze isn't there.'

'How can you be so certain? When people search it isn't just with two, they search with dozens. They go over the ground inch by inch.'

'We did. We knew it was there, and it disappeared—vanished, melted, or something. Magic for magic; it wasn't the real one.'

'You're too keen on this magic,' Francis told her. 'It's probably just lost, in the natural way. You know how things get into extraordinary places—let alone in a whole wood.'

Jane was beginning to shake her head again, but he checked her. 'We can't, Jane. We can't just leave it. However small the chance is. I rack my brains night and day. It's the only thing we can do.'

'It's no use.'

'It's Thursday,' Francis exclaimed passionately. 'And nobody does anything.'

'Father must be doing something . . .'

Francis made a gesture of impatience. Unwilling to go over that ground again, Jane began to turn away.

'All right, I'll go alone, then.' Francis' voice stopped her. 'I've thought the whole thing over a million times, and if we can't call in the police, it's absolutely the only thing we can do. Where was the place? Tell me which tree it was.'

'When will you go?' Jane asked him, not answering the question.

'I'll find a time.'

'Will you tell them?'

'Of course not. Describe to me where it was.'

Jane described the position of the beech and the oak. 'I daresay you'll find it still all swept up,' she added.

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She mooned on, hating the feeling of being at odds with her brother, yet determined not to be drawn into any more commerce with Mill Wood. The passing of day after day haunted her no less than it haunted Francis; her head was dull and heavy with searching for what she might do and finding there was nothing; the certainty that the only idea Francis could have would turn out useless made her feel duller and more baffled still. She and her mother had stopped asking each other questions. They could only be patient, Mrs Hinnabel had said. Jane could see that her mother scarcely found the prescription easier to follow than she did.



With a curious, half-shivering feeling of being alone and responsible for his family, Francis drew a torch from under his pillow ten minutes after his mother had turned out the light that night and set his alarm-clock for a quarter-past four. He doubted whether it was wise to use it; some other member of the household might hear it at the unaccustomed hour; but if he depended on himself for waking he was certain that he would never close his eyes all night. The vicious whirring of the clock tore him out of sleep almost it seemed to him before night had begun. He snatched it into bed and stopped the alarm in a second. There was the usual moment of agony, more intense than usual, when it hung in the balance whether he would slide back into sleep or wrench himself awake: his anxiety pricked him and with one huge, desperate, now-or-never movement, he swung the covers back and his feet on to the ground.

The morning was grey; it was light, but the light was dull. Francis sat still for a moment on the edge of his bed,

then began to pull on the clothes he had taken off last night.

He felt unrefreshed. Creeping to his bedroom door barefooted, he managed to turn the handle noiselessly; he picked up his shoes, left the door wide open, and descended the stairs. In the hall he paused for a moment and wondered whether he should get some food, but his total lack of appetite combined with the risk of making a noise in the kitchen caused him to reject the idea.

There was no dew on the grass; even out of doors the air was stale, as though it had not been changed overnight. Still barefooted, Francis painfully crossed the gravel and opened the door of the bicycle-shed, disentangled his own machine, and lifted it across to the lawn. This was the tricky part, as all the upper windows of the house were wide open. He closed the shed door, for Mr Hinnabel might well get up early and look out, wheeled his bicycle round the house as far as he could on the grass, carried it through the drive gate to the road, and propped it against a telegraph-pole. Then he put on his shoes and mounted. Nobody, needless to say, was astir at that hour. Francis had the whole world to himself, but the beautiful freshness of a new day and the touch of adventure and excitement that should have rewarded him for being up and out alone at such an hour were strangely absent. He rode through the town, eyeing the dustbins at the house doors with disgust.

On the bridge he halted to brief himself. He was not minutely familiar with Mill Wood, but from Jane's directions he would find the place. He had plenty of time. That was the thing. The others, he felt sure, had not spent long enough. There was no great conviction in him, no sparkling certainty that he would find the bronze, but there was a hope, or hope, he felt, had not been properly exhausted.

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And as there was so little he could do, since by the necessity for secrecy his hands were tied, it was a simple duty not to leave a stone unturned.

The Mill Pool was cold, brooding, like a lake that the sun never strikes. Half-enclosed by the thick, still bushes, there was something faintly terrifying about the grey water. Francis hurried by it on the foot-path and leaned his bicycle against the side of the Mill. Then cautiously, though there was not a soul in the world to hear him, he made off round the wood to the left, to enter it by Dark Alley, in accordance with Jane's instructions.

Suddenly, as he crept along, he realised what was inducing this unnatural quality of silence. Not a bird was singing. It was as if they, too, were in suspense.

Francis felt fairly certain that wherever he entered the wood he could strike Dark Alley, but he argued that to keep on round the outside to its entrance would be the safest way. Also, although he did not mention this to himself, he was in no hurry to forsake the open. In a few minutes he saw the silvery whiteness of the trunks of the dead trees. They had been struck by lightning, long before his time, and drove a ghostly wedge into the dense green of the wood. He wished Jane were with him, chided himself for a baby, quickened his pace, then suddenly stood, struck still as stone, as the boding silence of the morning was torn by a scream that froze his blood. Nothing followed; the silence closed in again. Something told him that the scream had been the dying scream of an animal. He was panting, but he forced himself to go on. Whatever was happening in the wood, his business was to get into the heart of it. He reached up and tore a switch from a sapling he was passing, and began savagely to cut to left and right at the stems that stood in his path.

Now he was at the entrance to Dark Alley and, scarcely pausing to brace himself, he lifted his head resolutely and was about to step between the blasted ivy-covered trunks. Then, for the second time, he stopped dead.

Against a tree not two yards from where he stood, a man was leaning, motionless as the tree he leaned against. He had been standing there watching Francis as he came on. He was a yokel, and Francis might have known him, but he did not. He might have felt no fear of him, even at five o'clock of a grey morning, except for the look of fixed and ugly determination that the stupid face bore, a look that conveyed, without a drawn breath or the movement of an eyelid, that the man was standing there in order that nobody should pass. They gazed at each other, Francis's heart thumping. Then, blindly, without ever having entered it, he backed away from Dark Alley. His unconscious needs were to betray no fear and to keep going. When he could reason again, and the thumping of his heart had died down, he reflected that the wood was large, and having put a good piece of the circumference between himself and his adversary he would enter in a new place, find Broad Walk, which could not be missed, and patrol it carefully until, over to the right, the dead beech came into sight. When he had left the entrance to Dark Alley about a mile behind him, he promised himself that he would take the next path leading in. He must not separate himself too far from his proposed scene of action; he must not waste any more time. The place he had now reached was perfectly remote; the man, presumably, was fixed at his post. In any case it was a matter of necessity. He must go in.

Now Francis was waiting for a break or path-end in the perimeter of trees. He came upon it suddenly, stepping not

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into a path but almost on to a huge figure standing motionless, a man straddled like a statue across the narrow opening. This time he did not wait to look. Half-running he stumbled away; out of eyeshot he ran gasping. When his breath failed him he realised that he was in a spot where he had never stood before. Must he go on or what must he do? The dead beech, the oak, the Bronze itself were receding from his mind; perhaps after all this was not a search to make alone; perhaps he had been wrong. All the same, he must go on. The thought of returning past the sentinels was too much for him. It would be a long way, but the extent of the wood could not be infinite. He must keep on round the circumference, but at a little distance, as though he had no thought of going in.

Francis kept going, for hours it seemed, with his heart in his mouth as he stumbled round the trees. Not to his surprise, but in fulfilment of a sickening certainty, his starting eyes made out the figure of a third sentinel before he was upon him. Forcing himself forward Francis scarcely looked; even so he knew the watcher was an old man, his expression at once threatening and leering, as he stood there on the lookout, dangerously still. They were poaching in the wood, that was evident. What, or by what means Francis did not know; but the homely, almost storybook word had acquired a hideous, evil ring.

How far still? How many more encounters? What was the time? Anxiety spurred him. Then suddenly, as the path curved again, he saw a clump of buildings before him, greyish, with low cottages. Could it be? He had never approached from this angle . . . But yes, it was the Mill. About half a mile to go . . . ten minutes would do it. Relief flooded him, and he became aware at the same instant of how appallingly hungry he was. Clear at last of

the circuit of the wood, he raced down the couple of hundred yards that separated him from the cottages and the Mill. His trusty bicycle! Then home! Then breakfast! First things first. He had failed for the moment with the Bronze, but only for the moment. He would think out some other way. Meanwhile perhaps after all it was not so late. They might not have missed him yet. He might still be in time for school.

But the horrors of the morning were not over. As Francis eagerly rounded the back of the Mill, he stepped this time upon the whole body of his adversaries at once. They had emerged; their working hours were over. There were four of them, lounging beside a small brake or van which stood directly in his path. They were waiting for him and there was not a sign of his bicycle.

His eyes sought the empty space where it should have rested against the Mill wall. As he withdrew them, he felt that the eyes of the whole four were fixed upon him.

'Looking for something?' asked the biggest of them slowly.

Then he jerked his head threateningly in the direction in which Francis was going. 'Get on! And keep your nose out of other people's business!'

He felt them watching him out of sight. As he passed the Mill pool he heard the sound of coarse laughter, then the noise of an engine being started up. Half-blind with panic and indignation and anguish at the loss of his bicycle, he reached the bridge over the Aske and saw that beyond it the buses were running. Then he remembered that he was penniless. He pressed forward on his aching feet, going by side streets to cut a yard or two here and there off the endless stretch through the town.

'What's the time?' was the first question that burst from

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him as he confronted his mother at the door.

'Francis! Are you all right?'

'Yes. Has Jane gone?'

'Jane's gone and Father's gone. It's ten past nine. Where have you been?'

'To the wood, but I couldn't get into it. My bicycle's been stolen.'

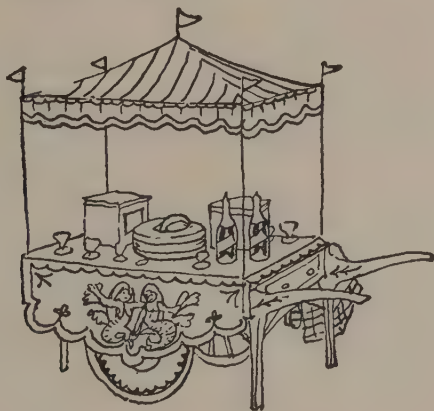
'What! Are you sure you're all right?'

'I'm late for school!'

'Get some breakfast. I'll write you a note. Take Father's bicycle. Tell it me all tonight.'

She came back from the drawing-room, where she was writing, with the pen in her hand. 'And don't tell Father anything. Not about the bicycle or anything. It doesn't matter. He's got enough to think about just now.'

The whole manner of his reception after his horrible adventure, his mother's dismissal, almost unnoticed, of the awful loss of his bicycle, suddenly demonstrated to Francis, more eloquently than hours of insistence by Jane could have done, the true depths of his parents' agitation and concern about the Bronze.



Chapter Eleven

FRIDAY MORNING saw the three museum colleagues again at their café table, and Mr Hinnabel pushing his little box, now getting somewhat rubbed at the corners, across to Roger Fiske. He silently followed it up with one of the unbroken packets of cigarettes, taken at random from his pocket. Roger arranged the two little objects very carefully side by side in neighbouring squares of the tiled table-top. When he was satisfied he looked up.

‘More research?’

‘Large-scale research.’

‘*Palma*,’ murmured Roger thoughtfully, reading the name on the packet. ‘Don’t think I know it.’

He extracted a clean white cigarette and laid it to his nose. Then he did the same with the cigarette-stub. After a pause he carefully repeated the action in each case.

‘While it must be admitted that the scent’s not as fresh as it was’—he indicated the match-box—‘I’m afraid I still don’t think that’s it.’

Mr Hinnabel replaced the cigarette, pushed the packet over to Tom Arber, who took charge of it, and felt in his pocket again. It was *Bandiera* that came up this time.

‘Ah, *Bandiera*,’ murmured Roger once again, arranging the packet with utmost care exactly level with the match-box. ‘Now I wonder . . .’ He decided at last to break into

it, and the ritual was gone through again and repeated again.

'I hate to disappoint you, Paul,' he pronounced at last.

Bandiera lay by *Palma* beside Tom Arber's coffee-cup. Mr Hinnabel said nothing, but produced his third packet. As he guided it with finger and thumb exactly into place, Roger Fiske glanced at the café clock. His expression seemed to say that he was enjoying the game, and would be glad to carry out any tests that Mr Hinnabel suggested, but wondered how many were to be gone through in the twenty minutes they usually allowed themselves for coffee.

The third packet bore the name *Nuvole*, which meant *Clouds*, and bore also the picture of a small, fat lady smoking in a hammock with her legs well over the side, blowing out clouds which floated into the sky. Roger repeated his experiment as usual, but at the end of his second inquiry, still made no statement. Mr Hinnabel, for all his silence, grew a little tense. Tom Arber, puffing his pipe, gazed at them like an onlooker watching two champions at chess. Suddenly Roger pushed back his chair with a loud clatter, calling across to the man behind the counter, 'Wally! Can I wash my hands?'

Wally, if he felt surprise, gave no sign of it, but led the gentleman off into the back regions, only murmuring apologetically that they hadn't got much of a place.

Roger returned in a couple of minutes, and as he sat down again he took out and unfolded his handkerchief and carefully finished drying his hands. He sniffed his clean fingers delicately. 'Now let's give it a chance,' he suggested.

Once again the operation was gone through. Then, closing his eyes and throwing back his head he offered the stub and the cigarette alternately to his nose. The

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watchers hung suspended, while, like a seer coming out of a trance, he resumed his normal position.

'I should say that was it,' he said.

* * * *

As soon as Jane reached the dining-room next morning she was sent back by her mother to get Francis out of bed and tell him to come down and have breakfast. Feeling somewhat injured, she climbed upstairs again. Francis was reading, with all the covers on the floor.

'You're to get up.'

'Who said so?'

'Mother.'

Without offering to move, her brother looked at her bitterly. 'Can't they leave me alone? It's Saturday, isn't it?'

Jane understood his feelings. He had described to her his adventures at the wood and she realised that he was feeling not only baffled and disappointed but badly shaken, and totally unappreciated in his efforts for the family's good. Obviously, too, though nobody else seemed to be noticing it, he was bound to be worrying about the loss of his bicycle. She was sorry for him, but at the same time faintly impatient. She had known no good could come of another attempt on Mill Wood.

'Well, I've told you.'

'Told me what?'

'That you've got to get up.'

'Leave me alone!' With a furious movement Francis thrust himself farther down on the pillow and returned to his book.

Left to finish her breakfast in solitude, Jane spread her toast heavily with butter and marmalade with an idea of solacing herself for the ruffled beginning of the day. It was

going to be very hot. The blinds were already half-drawn in the dining-room and it was pleasant to linger and keep the thought of activity at bay; especially since she suspected that her morning's employments were more likely to be dictated by Mrs Hinnabel than left to her own choice. She was holding her last mouthful of toast in her hand when Mr Hinnabel came in, unnaturally wearing his Museum suit and a collar and tie. He surveyed her in silence for a moment, then he said:

'Jane, there's another expedition afoot.'

She looked up at him with sinking heart.

'To the wood?'

'No. To London this time.'

'Oh,' she exclaimed in surprise. London was undoubtedly better, but the memory of last Sunday was still strong on her.

'There's something I've got to do there. It's about the Bronze, of course. And I think I might do better if I had some help.'

Jane put the last piece of toast into her mouth and picked up her cup to finish her coffee.

'When?'

'Now.'

'Does Mother know?'

'Yes. I've told her. I'd like to catch the nine-forty if we can.'

'Do I have to change or anything?'

'Oh, no.'

Jane stood beside her father while he was putting on his shoes and then still waited.

'Are we ready?' he asked her.

'I am.' She was expecting him to take down his raincoat.

'Aren't you bringing it?'

'Bringing what?'

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'The Rod.'

'No. Not this time. It's too difficult. We'll go as we are.'

She was conscious of a feeling of relief. The Rod was a marvel, a saviour, a worker of wonders, but the magic and the awful mystery took a terrible lot out of her. She felt that for any repetition of last Sunday she lacked strength.

They went out at the gate and began the short walk in silence. Nor did Mr Hinnabel speak as they trod the narrow footpath between hedges that formed the short cut to the station. Jane began to wonder if she was going to be required to tramp on in ignorance as she had done before. But when they emerged on to the open road he immediately set her fears at rest.

'I'm not keen on talking secrets between those thick hedges,' he said, speaking in an ordinary conversational tone. 'Now I'll put you in the picture a bit, Jane, such as the picture is. You remember that little match-box Francis picked up last Monday?'

'That match-box? Yes. I remember it. Was it anything?'

'It was everything—at least, it was almost everything we've got so far.' Step by step Mr Hinnabel led her over the activities that had occupied him during the week.

'I knew it! I knew you'd been doing something!' Jane exclaimed vehemently, as he came to an end. Her father gazed at her in surprise.

'Francis said you'd been doing nothing. He keeps saying you ought to call in the Police.'

'Poor old Francis,' murmured Mr Hinnabel, without showing the smallest resentment. 'He's provided the vital clue.'

'Don't you think you ought to have brought him, then, instead of me?' Jane asked.

'Perhaps . . . I thought of it . . . I just don't know. You

see, Jane'—Mr Hinnabel was talking to her now in that blessed fashion of not treating her as a child, but simply as another person—'this isn't a matter of whose turn it is, or who deserves it most, or anything of that kind. I've got to get that bronze back. That's all I'm thinking about. And there's not much time. I believe another pair of eyes might be useful. Whether yours or Francis' I simply don't know. But I'd a fancy to take you.'

They were at the station now. There were quite a few people on the platform for the nine-forty, but it was too late for regular travellers and there was nobody they knew. Mr Hinnabel bought a paper for Jane and one for himself and they settled themselves in opposite corners of a carriage. At eleven o'clock they were in London, and in another ten minutes a bus had put them down in the Charing Cross Road. As they stood alone on an island in the middle of the traffic, waiting to finish the crossing, Mr Hinnabel took Jane by the elbow and nodded slightly towards the opposite pavement.

'That's the district. All we can do is to patrol it with our eyes and ears open and hope for the best. Your eyes will be more useful than mine because I hardly know the look of the man. We must look without appearing to be looking, and if by any wonderful chance you see him, find some way of letting me know, but don't on any account say his name.'

The little street they had entered ran round the dingy back of a theatre and then became a street of small and grubby shops.

'We're making towards Cyprus Street, the market I told you of,' said Mr Hinnabel.

They walked on slowly, and the neighbourhood gradually brightened up. The shops became lively, and

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of a kind Jane had never seen before. Mr Hinnabel was more than willing to stop and gaze in them, and Jane realised that he was glad of any excuse for hanging about. They stopped before a food shop full of wonderful pickles and cheeses and drums of salt fish arranged in Catharine wheels; another full of gleaming pots and pans and pointed cooking-knives and chefs' high white caps; and a third crammed with a thousand objects made of raffia and straw.

'What about a drink?' asked Mr Hinnabel suddenly, and guided her into a place that Jane knew at once her mother would have called most unsuitable. It was crammed with men all standing up and talking loudly, and after a moment Jane realised that none of them were talking English. The din was so tremendous that for the moment she thought they were quarrelling and shrank back frightened, but then she realised that they were all laughing and slapping each other on the back. Leaving her in a corner, Mr Hinnabel threaded his way to the counter and came back after an interval carrying two small golden glasses in which ice clinked. The drink was delicious, so much so that on putting down her empty glass Jane felt somewhat ashamed to observe that her father had scarcely taken his first sip. But Mr Hinnabel, odd as ever, laughed in an approving way.

'It's a thirsty morning. So much to the good.'

In a few minutes they left the noisy place for the street, which was scarcely less noisy, and moved slowly on, sometimes in the glare of the sun and sometimes by narrow alleys in the shade. At the door of another of these curious cafés choked with men, Mr Hinnabel stopped.

'That was a *very* short drink', he murmured, with the old light dancing in his blue eyes.

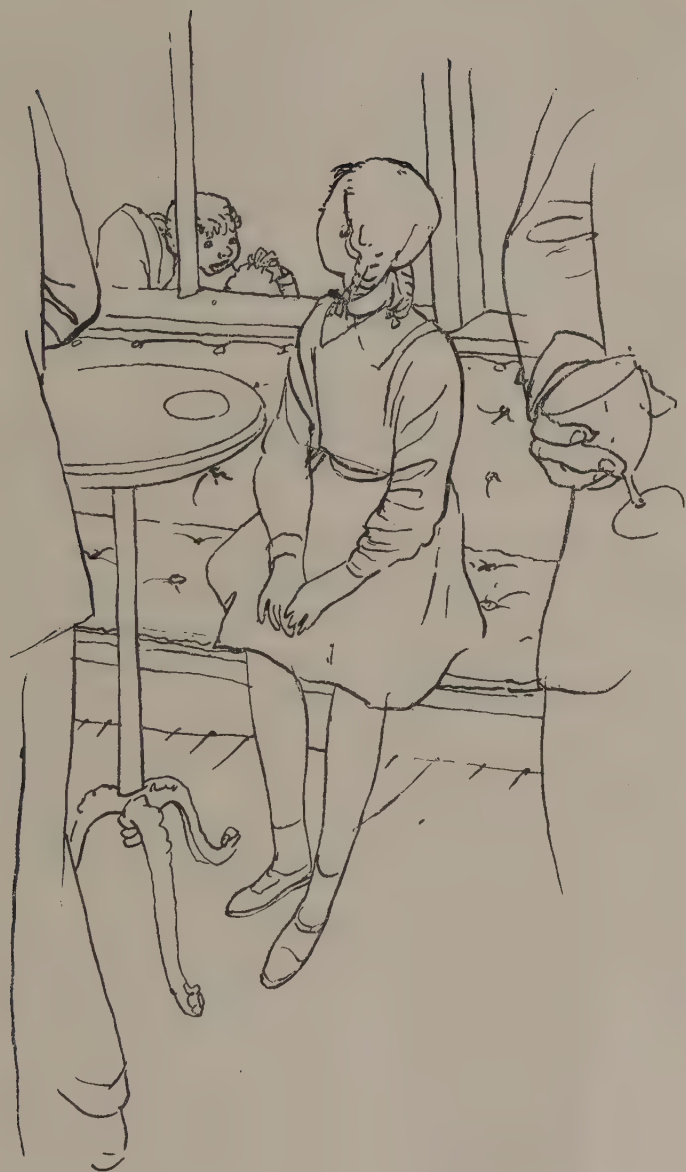
The café was on a corner. Jane was guided through the throng and found herself seated this time on an ancient green plush bench inside a window that looked on to a side street. Before her was a tiny round marble table like a mushroom, with a single iron leg. After a little while two of the same golden drinks arrived, accompanied this time by a frothy chocolate cake. Jane could not pretend that she was not enjoying herself. For decency's sake she sipped more slowly and looked about her. Outside the window, separated from her by the glass only, was a perambulator and a bunch of little dark girls, playing a kind of hopscotch on the pavement. Jane watched the game. The skinny little girls in turn sprang like kangaroos from square to square, and there was much shouting and pointing of fingers by those standing on the kerb. Understanding nothing, she turned her attention to the baby, which had its back to her. At that moment, as though feeling her eyes upon it, it turned and gazed inwards. Jane found herself regarding a round white face, very fat, surmounted by a tremendous mop of dark curls, enormous dark-brown eyes, and a larger and more curious nose than she would have thought possible for an infant face. It was certainly a baby . . . but a darker and more exaggerated version of a baby than anybody had ever seen. And somehow, startlingly unfamiliar as the creature was, she had a feeling that she had seen it before. Suddenly she gave a great chuckle.

'Of course,' she said, turning to Mr Hinnabel. 'It's IT.'

Mr Hinnabel, so handy at puzzling other people with his utterances, experienced what it was like to be puzzled himself.

'What are you talking about, Jane?'

Jane waved her cake in the direction of the window.



'It's his baby. Da new baby dat he's gotta. Can't you see?'

He could not see, because, unlike Jane, he had not gazed fascinated a hundred times at Hokey-Pokey's nose while being refreshed with ice-cream: but he was already half out of the door.

'Come on!' he muttered, his voice bursting with excitement. 'You speak to it.'

Jane watched her courteous father stride straight into the middle of the hopscotch game, spoiling a magnificent leap.

'Oh, I'm so sorry!' he exclaimed, as if until that moment the little girls had been invisible, and then in a minute they were all laughing and skipping and chattering round him.

Jane addressed herself to the baby, somewhat doubtfully. The babies she was used to talking to were small, round, blue-eyed things. The creature, however, tired of being left out of the hopscotch game, laughed and worked itself up and down delightedly at being noticed. 'Ah, that's Mr Nica's baby,' said Mr Hinnabel, coming over and gently taking one of its hands. 'What's your name, old chap?'

'Augusto,' squeaked the little girls.

'And now I want to see his father,' proceeded Mr Hinnabel. 'Do you know if he's at home?'

One of the little girls, scarcely larger than the baby, bounced it smartly into an upright position, shook its pillow, and jerked the perambulator into the road. Hopping and chattering round Jane and Mr Hinnabel, the whole six enthusiastically acted as guides, the procession causing some interest in the narrow street as they went along. 'Mr Nica,' one or other of the little girls would explain, in reply to the questing glances of some

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lady at her door. After a hundred yards the little girl wheeling the perambulator suddenly turned in at right angles and shot it on to the pavement, nodding her head towards the side-door of a dwelling over a shop.

'Stay here, Jane,' said Mr Hinnabel a little tensely. But before he could raise his hand to knock, the door opened from the inside and a man and two women came out.

'Mr Nica?' Mr Hinnabel said.

Leaning back into the passage, one of the departing women shouted an ear-piercing flood of Italian up the unseen stairs.

In Mr Hinnabel the bursting excitement of the last ten minutes reached its climax. Then sank.

'Beppe gone. Mr Nica gone.' It was another woman who stood at the door.

'Gone?' He could not believe it. He doubted for the moment if she was telling the truth.

'Yes. Me Mrs Nica. Mr Nica gone. He gone ten minutes. Takka da train.'

As if explaining his own language to him, the company at the door took up the chorus. '*Treno*. Gone *treno*. He takka da train.'

'Ah,' said Mr Hinnabel, pulling himself together. 'This evening, perhaps?'

'He no come back. He takka da train.'

'Another time, then. Thank you. Good morning,' said Mr Hinnabel, leaning away from the door as he spoke.

He steered Jane round the corner and she perceived that he was frantically looking for a taxi, which took him several minutes to find.

'Jump in, Jane,' he cried, swinging her and himself in after her, long before the cab stopped. 'King's Cross for all you're worth!' he shouted to the man.

'We've got ten minutes,' he told Jane tensely. 'If he's taken the train, I reckon it's the train to Askham. It'll be the twelve thirty-five.'

They were out of the taxi while it was still moving, and in an instant Mr Hinnabel was darting in and out of the crowds like a snake.

'Now run for it!'

They had reached the open station-hall and his hand was on Jane's shoulder. The huge clock standing over them showed twelve thirty-five precisely. As they reached the barrier, the train the other side of it was just beginning to move out. Jane stood there gazing after it, watching the empty length of line increase. The train was going so slowly they could almost have made a spurt and laid a hand on it, but it was unaware of them, it quickened and curved round a bend, it shook them off, leaving them standing there full of the most horrible feeling of abandonment and despair. For a moment Mr Hinnabel gazed with her, panting and struck silent. Suddenly she felt his hand on her shoulder again.

'There's still another chance!'

'What? The next train?'

'Good lord, no! It's this train or nothing . . .'

They were off at a run again, with what breath was left in them, even as her father spoke, stumbling and dodging back across the station-hall and past the booking-office, bumping into the crowds as they ran. There was no difficulty about a taxi this time.

'I'll direct you.' Leaning forward with 'First right. First left. Here, turn before the lights!' Mr Hinnabel guided the driver urgently through a maze of back streets and brought him to a stop.

'Live and learn!' said the man cheerily, pocketing his

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money and wheeling round in the impossibly small space, as he and Mr Hinnabel waved each other good-bye.

They were standing in a kind of long cobbled yard, Jane saw, full of cars and garages for cars, with little dwellings like dolls'-houses overhead, some smart and bright with window-boxes and others grimed with dirt. *Page's Mews*, she saw written up on a wall.

Mr Hinnabel was already racing down the cobbles. Almost at the bottom he stopped, crying 'Ah, Tom!' Jane saw a man, whom she at once described to herself as rather froglike, standing in one of the big doorways with something like a fire-engine piling up behind him. He was small, with a vast, bald forehead and round glasses, dressed in shorts and shirt, and wiping his filthy hands on a filthy rag.

'I need your help, Tom.'

'The car?'

'Yes.'

'Jump in. What direction?'

'Great North Road.'

Once more Jane found herself a-wheel. It had taken thirty seconds. She was perched up between the two men, the engine was running, and they were off. As the car swung round, she saw to her amazement a bed and a washstand standing lonely in a corner of the great space yawning behind.

The car was enormous and had no top of any kind to it. Jane was sitting between Tom and her father on what felt to be a high red-leather sofa, and there was another red-leather sofa at a slightly higher level behind. The outside of the car was white, there were gleaming touches of brass about it which turned out to be lamps, and the wheel was so high that it almost touched Tom's chin.

She caught her breath with a gasp as he wrenched and twisted it among the cars on the cobbles. It seemed they must hit everything, but they hit nothing, and in a minute they were in the thick of the traffic on a densely crowded London road.

'Where are we going?' Tom asked her father.

'Askham. Do you know it?'

'Yes. How far is it?'

'Twenty-five miles.'

'Are we in a hurry?'

'We're in the deuce of a hurry. We've got to beat a train.'

'What time does it get in?'

'One-twenty.'

'And the time is now?'

Mr Hinnabel pored over his watch. 'Seventeen minutes to one.'

In short, sharp rushes, never holding for more than a few moments in one direction, yet never by some miracle stopping or being held up, driving for the most part, it seemed to Jane, with his head turned completely over his shoulder, Tom writhed and twisted the huge creature in and out. 'Got to get clear of Town,' he muttered. 'Come on, old girl' (this was to the car, as they went over the pavement), 'no need to fuss. Put your arm right out; we'll have no nonsense,' he said sharply to Mr Hinnabel, as they swept magnificently round a bus.

Gasp from Jane followed gasp. When she could bear no more she hid her face against her father's shoulder, until at last, like a sea-sick traveller feeling harbour-waters under him, she became aware that they were no longer charging and twisting, but moving steadily in the straight. She ventured to lift her eyes, and to her amazement saw

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the frog-face, wreathed in happiness, beaming down on her.

'Now we can go,' he said. 'Where is it, Paul?'

'Keep on through Kingly. Not the by-pass. It's the first turning to the right after the village. Shall we do it, do you reckon?' Mr Hinnabel had to add.

'Oh, yes, we always do it,' was the comfortable answer. 'But tell me, what exactly is it that we have to do?'

'We have to meet a man who should be travelling on that train. We must get there a little before.'

'Let's move a bit then,' said Tom Arber, smiling down at Jane again.

They flew on, passing everything, but the motion was so soft that they hardly felt the pace. The sky was blue, the sun poured down, the wind tore at their hair. Jane's fear had changed to rapture. She felt she wanted to shout and sing.

At Hollyford, the village after Kingly, there was a level crossing, and they shot through just as the gates began to close.

'By Jove, though, let's have a look at her,' cried Tom Arber, jamming on the brakes and sending his treasure roaring backwards for a hundred yards.

They stood up in a line, and with extraordinary satisfaction looked back at the train chuff-chuffing in its complacent fashion between the white gates.

'She's beaten and she doesn't know it,' Tom murmured, letting the clutch in with a grin.

Beaten she was. Impossible as it had seemed an hour ago, they were in Askham with fifteen seconds to spare. Relief and excitement were flooding them, the train was in sight, when suddenly, calamity, in its most idiotic form, descended out of a clear sky. They realised afterwards

that they had been dimly conscious of a hooting, but it was no concern of theirs. They made to turn into the station yard, when all at once two cars, driven, Mr Hinnabel perceived instantly, by two famous genial bores of the sailing-club, were seen to be converging across their bows. Short of manslaughter, they had to slow down.

'Stop!' roared the drivers simultaneously. 'Can't you hear *anything*! You're not going to get away with it. It's a miracle! Get *down*! We've got to be shown over it!'

And almost before they realised what was happening, the travellers found themselves the centre of a crowd fatuously and ecstatically gaping at Tom Arber's car. It was Saturday mid-day. The street was full of people and traffic, that piled up round them from all sides and angles. Worse, it seemed that the whole of the sailing-club, several of them towing boats on trailers, were making for the reservoir. Errand-boys on tricycles hung in the fairway. Loafers and women with shopping-baskets, as though conjured out of the earth, leaned against the wings feasting their eyes on the brass lamps.

'It's a museum-piece!' 'It's the greatest car in history!'

Mr Hinnabel felt an overpowering desire to strike off the brotherly hands laying hold of the door-handles. Tom Arber, already dismounted, was making furious efforts to clear the road. With horror Jane saw a policeman approaching. With greater horror Mr Hinnabel saw two cars nosing their way out of the station-yard. The passengers they had come to meet had had time to alight and cross the footbridge and be collected. The passenger Mr Hinnabel had come to meet had had time (if he existed) to alight, and, without crossing the footbridge, to disappear.

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THEY FED and thanked Tom Arber, waved his fire-engine off at the gate and then, in an atmosphere of awful flatness, went their various ways about the house. In the middle of the afternoon Mr Hinnabel got out his own old car and drove off quietly towards the town. At the top of the High Street he caught sight of Francis returning from cricket, and stopped beside him at the kerb.

‘Do you want a lift?’

Francis got in thankfully.

‘Even cricket’s hot work. You were right, you know,’ added Mr Hinnabel in a toneless voice, before his son had had time to reply.

Francis gazed at him uncomprehendingly.

‘About calling the Police. I’m on my way to do it. I gave myself a fortnight to get the Bronze back. You know, I’d brought it home for cleaning and could have kept it reasonably for a fortnight. I reckoned that in that time I could get it back by myself and nobody’d be any the wiser. But I’ve failed. Time’s up on Tuesday—or on Monday night rather. It’s been a week of hit and miss, and this last miss I’ve had this morning settles it. We can’t keep it to ourselves any longer. And on Monday,’ he finished somewhat bitterly, ‘the whole thing’ll be in headlines a yard high.’

Francis had a curious feeling. He was sorry for his father.

All the same, there was a certain satisfaction in being proved right and a certain excitement in being on the way to unfold the story of a crime to the Police.

'Am I to come with you?'

'Do, if you like,' agreed Mr Hinnabel moodily. 'I dare say you're more up in this kind of thing than I am.'

The Police Station was at the other end of the High Street, and they made a detour to reach it. Half-way down the side-street through which they were driving Mr Hinnabel drew up at an opening lined with planks and ladders. 'I'll just have a word with Goslett about the painting,' he said.

Francis understood him. Goslett was the builder. The firm of Goslett had long been an institution in Askham. Father and son, they had been ministering to and patching up the old houses of the place, such as the Hinnabels inhabited, for generations, and knew their ins and outs and their weak spots like the backs of their own hands. They were great craftsmen and had been held in high affection by the family ever since Francis had been of an age to trot round after them, hoping to be given a bit of putty. A little chat with Ted Goslett, he knew, would comfort his father in the midst of this beastly errand.

Mr Hinnabel slid to a stop opposite the mouth of Goslett's yard. Suddenly a hot hand seized his knee in a grip of iron, and Francis hissed in his ear, 'Look at that!'

From the passage between the ladders and the scaffold-poles stepped out, as large as life and half-a-dozen times as natural, a jaunty figure, carrying over its shoulder like a banner a brightly-painted scalloped board. GIUSEPPE NICA—the letters were a delicate silver-blue, shaded in deeper blue. The glistening and golden-haired mermaids that flanked them were of a beauty with which the sirens

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themselves could not compare. Mr Hinnabel was not the only one who thought the blameless weather right for painting. Neat and cocky as a sparrow and clearly as delighted with himself as a child with a bright new toy, the little man stepped straight in front of their windscreen, and, looking right and left, prepared to cross the road.

'As easy as that!' breathed Mr Hinnabel, gazing fascinated. 'Keep dead still, Francis. We mustn't scare our little bird.'

With bated breath they watched him cross the road and disappear in the direction of the High Street. Mr Hinnabel dismounted from the car, and, Francis following, strolled into the yard.

'Good afternoon, sir.' Old Mr Goslett greeted him cheerfully. 'Thinking about those window-frames of yours?'

'I am,' Mr Hinnabel answered. 'I'm hoping you're not going to keep putting it off until it rains.'

He followed the old man into the carpenter's shop and gazed about him contentedly. 'I've just passed our friend with his work of art on his shoulder,' he nodded towards the entrance. 'He still brings you his custom, I see.'

Old Goslett laughed indulgently. 'He still has a fancy for Ted to do it. He reckons he's a dab hand at mermaids, what with having been a sailor and knowing foreign parts.'

'He isn't back here, is he? Nica, I mean?' asked Mr Hinnabel.

'Oh, no. He's settled up in London. His missis can't stand the country. He's only come for the night, to get the board off his cart. Ted would have put him up, but we've got the daughter-in-law from Luton, so we've had to put him to sleep over at Ada's . . .'

'Ada . . .'

Mr Hinnabel mused gently, with the air of

one who paused before dropping a piece of a familiar jigsaw puzzle into place.

'Mrs Battiscombe,' said Francis, kicking his father sharply on the ankle. 'You know . . . Reg's wife, where mother gets the eggs.'

'That's right,' said Mr Goslett, gazing down at the young gentleman admiringly. 'We're all of us sisters and cousins and aunts.'

'What do we do?' asked Francis, chafing with excitement, when they were seated side by side again. 'I thought you would have chased him with the car.'

'You know where she lives, this Mrs Battiscombe?' asked Mr Hinnabel, without replying to the question.

'Of course. We're always going there.'

'What kind of a house is it?'

'Oh, it's just an ordinary kind of a little house. It's in Tapton Road.'

'Has it two entrances?' his father continued. 'It might have, I suppose, if she's got a garden where she keeps hens.'

'No,' answered Francis. 'It's the next house to a corner.'

'Ah, that's better,' murmured Mr Hinnabel. 'That makes it simpler.'

'But what do we *do*?' persisted Francis frantically. 'We're giving him time to get away.'

'I'm pretty sure he'll sleep there. We can count on that.' Mr Hinnabel serenely turned the car homeward. 'The board's a blind, of course,' he added casually, and pursing up his lips, to Francis' amazement, he whistled an odd bar, as they entered their own drive.

The hunter had sighted his quarry. The loathsome idea of calling in the Police had vanished like a bad dream. The operation remained in Hinnabel hands.

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'It's puzzling,' said Mr Hinnabel, in a frank council of war that he was holding with his forces that evening, 'that our friend should have come back here to Askham. My guess is that he's up to some business that can't be done in London. My guess is also that Mrs Nica isn't in the know. He's got to square her somehow. That's where the board comes in. She knows that lovely old cart of his is the apple of his eye and a terrific selling-point with ice-cream. And a trip to get the precious board painted would be a safe thing and could hardly rouse her suspicions. Another guess I have,' Mr Hinnabel added, 'is that last Sunday will have taught him not to leave valuable bronzes about in trees. Now, Francis—' there was no hint now of the usual half-bantering tone: the note was more that of a commander briefing his men '—I don't mean him to get away this time, as you can imagine, and I shall need your help. I reckon he'll sleep at Ada's. I've been over the ground, and the plan is this. I shall stand watch. By the mercy of Providence there's a telephone-booth in Tapton Street and I shall telephone you your instructions, which will almost certainly be to get to some point in the quickest possible time.'

'When are you going?' Francis was tremendously on the spot.

'Pretty soon,' his father answered. 'I'm taking no chances.'

'Are you going to watch all *night*?' asked Jane in an awe-struck voice.

'I can see nothing else for it,' replied Mr Hinnabel, twinkling. 'But I've every hope that the night's going to be fine.'

'But suppose you telephone at three in the morning!' The whole thing was becoming terrific. 'Will he have to be *up*?'

'Somebody'll have to be up, my girl,' was the brisk answer. 'This isn't the moment to boggle about losing a bit of sleep.'

Mr Hinnabel was to be a lone sentry for as many hours as proved to be necessary, but at home the watch was to be split into three. Jane had insisted on not being left out. The orders were that somebody was to sit by the telephone all night. Everything, of course, depended on speed. The watcher (if not Francis) was to get him to the instrument and he was to be out of the house and on his way in a matter of seconds. Francis was to take the first watch so as to be able to get some sleep later, if up till then there had been no summons, Jane was to take over for an hour between eleven and twelve, Mrs Hinnabel was to relieve her and carry on over the small hours for as long as she felt able, after which she would summon whichever one of them she thought fit. Finally, Francis was not to undress.

Ten o'clock saw Mr Hinnabel in Tapton Street. Contrary to expectation it did not promise to be a fine night; the cloudless sky had clouded over and there was a drizzle, so that the grey raincoat was not out of place, secreting in its pockets various little packets of sustaining food. Tapton Street was a street of middle-aged little red-brick houses and little shops. Mr Hinnabel approached it from the side farthest from the High Street. This was the side of the shops, one of which was a post-office in a newsagent's, with the telephone-booth on the pavement outside. Number thirty-nine was the Battiscombes', next to a corner house, as Francis had said, on the other side of the road. The observation-point was the entry to a rather fly-blown greengrocer's, a few doors from the post-office, not opposite number thirty-nine, but commanding a view of it. The entrance was recessed and provided cover. Having

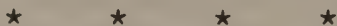
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patrolled discreetly for fifteen minutes in the hinterland, until the little street was reduced to total emptiness by the now increasing rain, Mr Hinnabel slipped into his hiding-place and prepared to endure the odour of ancient cabbage leaves all night.

By taking up his position soon after ten o'clock (which was the earliest possible moment, since otherwise it would have been too light) the watcher hoped to be able to establish the whereabouts of Hokey-Pokey and his hosts. He hoped, in fact, to be able to satisfy himself that at some point the little man was safe in bed, when he would proceed to keep watch over him with all the tender care of a guardian angel.

The appearance of Tapton Street was not festive on a wet Saturday night. Throughout its length there was exactly one front-room illuminated. Little, in fact, was going on that required the lighting-up of parlours. Number thirty-nine was not in total darkness. There was a dim glow behind the coloured glass panels of the front door, which spelt a light somewhere in the back regions. What did this mean? What, at this moment, could be going on? For the first time in his life Mr Hinnabel was sorry that he had the habit of removing himself so completely from all kinds of gossip and casual talk. He might know otherwise what sort of a man Reg Battiscombe was. He would know (for this was the kind of thing Jane and Francis knew as it were unconsciously) whether he was a man who rolled home at a late hour after an evening of beer and darts, or whether he sat sullenly in his own kitchen reading the Police News. He would know what kind of terms the Battiscombes were on with the Gosletts, and whether Hokey-Pokey's visit would be the occasion for them to spend a convivial evening together. All he knew actually was that

Reg was the plumber in the Goslett team. Until Francis kicked him on the ankle he had not known Reg had a wife, let alone a wife who was Mr Goslett's Ada. He pressed a little back from the drips that were falling regularly from the doorway on to his hat. All he could do was to watch and wait.



Mrs Hinnabel, engaged as women invariably were at every crisis in the humble but necessary task of preparing hot drinks, gave a great start as the telephone rang at ten thirty-five. It barely rang once. Francis had snatched the receiver to his ear in a split second.

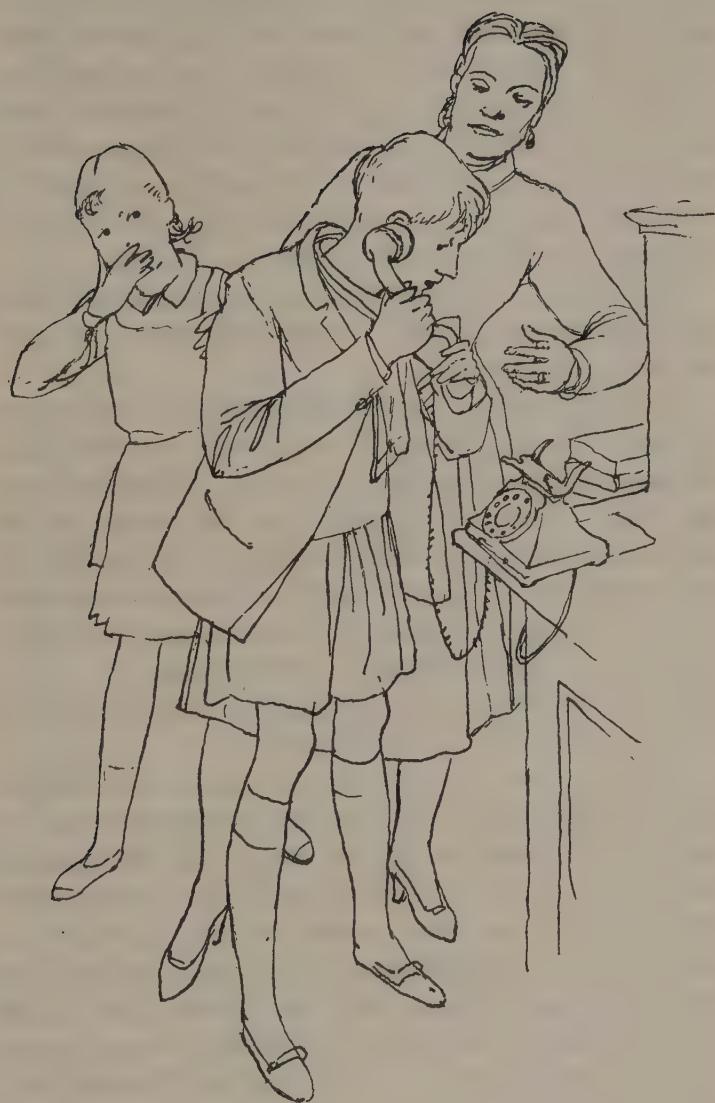
'Up? Up? Of course I'm up,' he was saying in a tense voice as Jane and Mrs Hinnabel simultaneously reached his side. His mother by main force dragged the receiver from him. To his strained expectation, she saw, no voice could sound along the line except his father's.

'Hallo,' she answered, trying to summon her most ordinary tone.

'Hallo? Is that you, Una?' It was Mrs Luxton. 'Have I offended Francis? Or are you having a party? Isn't it time for little boys to be in bed?'

'Yes. Is it?' Mrs Hinnabel gazed at her children wildly. 'I was just doing a bit of cooking.'

'Cooking? It's an odd moment, dear : but then you always were original. Look, this is what I rang up about . . .' She proceeded to ask if they would all come over the next evening before supper, and concluded, 'Do persuade Paul. I know he's difficult, but he must come and help us. We've got Tony Chancellor coming. You know, he's a critic on *Man and Wife*. Terribly brilliant. . . . Just up Paul's street.



In this unimaginable world from which the voice proceeded Mrs Hinnabel could focus nothing. '*Man and Wife*,' she heard her own voice repeating. She pulled herself together with a colossal effort. 'Oh, yes. I'll ask him.' In her mind's eye she was watching Mr Hinnabel flying over some dream landscape in pursuit of Hokey-Pokey. 'May I let you know? Of course, it would be lovely.' After an interchange of compliments she restored the receiver.

'The fool!' said Francis crudely, settling down within snatching-distance again. 'Father might have been trying to ring up at the same time.'

At eleven o'clock precisely Mrs Hinnabel reappeared and said, 'Come, Francis.' He obeyed her at once. On a campaign, sleep was an important duty no less than keeping guard. They went together to his room and she watched him arrange his shoes carefully beside his bed. She had brought his water-proof and laid it on the chair above them. He slipped between the blankets and was asleep almost before she had finished tucking him in.

On her way back to the kitchen she glanced in at Jane. 'Do you think you'll keep awake?'

The sentry, with her untouched knitting on her left and her unopened book on her right, was sitting with her chin cupped in her hands within six inches of the telephone. It was as if she was waiting for the instrument not merely to sound but to spring. She nodded her head briefly to the question, in evident fear of losing her concentration. Sleep was something that had temporarily passed out of the world. As she sat, she wondered whether it was that same morning she had gone to town with Mr Hinnabel, or a hundred years ago.

The shoes were ready, the telephone was ready, the sentinels were ready, but no call came to put them into

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action. Outside, the summer night was dark at last. The rain fell steadily. Mr Hinnabel, standing at ease as far as possible in the ill-smelling entry of the greengrocers', blessed it and cursed it in the same breath. Towards half-past eleven Tapton Street received back into its bosom its strayed revellers, the first a stout lady who had marketed far afield and came home laden with string bags, the second a youth without a latch-key, who, having glanced to left and right, pleased Mr Hinnabel by climbing in neatly at a bathroom window. Silence enfolded the uninteresting scene. The last lights were put out and only the dim glow in number thirty-nine remained. Suddenly, as a clock was striking twelve, the door that Mr Hinnabel was watching opened and a figure was framed in the dimness. Then there was a sound of snapping fingers, and Reg Battiscombe, turning up his coat collar, stepped into the rain, followed reluctantly by a fox-terrier. He crossed the road and passed within a yard of Mr Hinnabel, then halted by the telephone-booth, saying sharply in a low tone, 'Come on now. This'll do.' In a minute he had re-entered his door and audibly bolted it, and the light came on in the front bedroom above.

Whether the light came on at the same time in any back bedroom was not to be discovered for another nine hours.

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Francis was receiving fragrant coffee from his mother's hands while he sat doggedly at the telephone, Jane was sleeping with the sun full on her face, and Mr Hinnabel's strained eyes were dodging the same bright beams, when the door of number thirty-nine opened once more, and the man for whom he waited, again with unbelievable naturalness, stepped forth. Hokey-Pokey, hatless and unshaven

this time, looked up and down the empty street, closed the door noiselessly behind him and, with an odd mixture of caution and jauntiness, walked out at the gate. He crossed the street, passing, as Reg had done, within a yard of Mr Hinnabel, and kept on. The watcher peered out motionless behind him until he turned to his left. Then in fifteen seconds he had dialled his home number and heard Francis answer at the other end.

'He's out. He's turned from Tapton Street into St Alban's Road, where I shall be behind him. Approach him from your end. Walk, or you'll get there too soon.'

St Alban's Road was a long road leading out of the town. Mr Hinnabel hurried to its junction with Tapton Street, then slowed down and cautiously turned to his left. The morning being Sunday, only the milk cart and three muscular cyclists with white coats floating were abroad, and the little man was well in view. The distance to the point where Francis would enter the road was about three-quarters of a mile. However, for the moment there was no looking forward. It was simply a matter of keeping one's eye on the ball. As the pursued moved up St Alban's Road with his hands in his pockets, it was evident that he was unobtrusively gathering speed. The pursuer did likewise. Clearly the little man was not out for a morning stroll. The distance between them was regulated and kept constant for about five minutes, while the milkman and a timely boy delivering papers bobbed intermittently in and out of the picture, providing a suggestion of cover. A cross-road was ahead, on which at this moment dawned the bright vision of an early-morning bus. Hokey-Pokey began to cross St Alban's Road diagonally, still bearing to his left.

The bus, moving forward, disclosed to Mr Hinnabel's long-sighted eyes the well-known figure of a boy approach-

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ing from the opposite direction. Mr Hinnabel made a great round gesture with his arm, praying that Francis would understand, and stepped briskly across to where the quarry had disappeared in the wake of the bus. The recreation-ground! That was it. A likely place for an encounter early on a Sunday morning. And Francis, if he had read his instructions aright, was to fetch a compass round and come in, as it were, from the north-east. With Mr Hinnabel following close as he dared, Hokey-Pokey gained the edge of the green rectangle where formerly he had traded so briskly, and threw a glance all round him.

Not a childish hand reached for the iron chains of the swings, not a childish scream arose from the paddling-pool. The larks, as yet in undisturbed possession, sang aloud. But Mr Hinnabel, angel of justice as he was, swept his first glance back and forth across the place, not in the fear of being observed, but with a different purpose. His eye found what it sought. At either end of the recreation-ground stood a small glass-and-concrete shelter where old people sat out of the wind. An old person sat in one now, motionless, like a draped figure carved out of black rock, and, dimly seen through the glass as she was, yet sinister and foreign in the pure morning. Snatching out the Rod and pointing it towards her in a single gesture, Mr Hinnabel gasped almost with a sob, 'In the Other Shelter!'

Which way would the little man first turn to look? If he turned this way, to the left, Mr Hinnabel must simply rush in and overpower him. If he turned to the right, Mr Hinnabel could afford to wait. The little man turned to the right, and, seeing what his eye desired, made straight towards it, Mr Hinnabel following in the open this time with no anxiety that his man would look back. Again

Hokey-Pokey quickened his pace, almost to a run. He entered the shelter and immediately left it. Francis rose up from behind a screen of dirty hawthorn-trees in front of him. Far out on the left Jane was seen bicycling wildly towards them over the turf. Hokey-Pokey shot past Francis with the speed of lightning.

'Look inside!' roared Mr Hinnabel to Jane with the full force of his lungs as he thundered up, giving chase.

The Bronze lay on the shelter floor, surely as unlikely a resting-place as it had ever had in its long history. Jane gazed at it awed, the little human but un-human figure, with its long bulging eyes and conical hat. For just one second she dared not touch it. Then she stooped down and snatched it up. Having no bodice in which to thrust the precious thing, like a girl in history, she yet contrived to hide it on her person, and turning her bicycle, rode home in something like an ecstasy, with sharp points pricking into her flesh.

Not daring to watch from the gate in case it might cause remark, Mrs Hinnabel had seen her approach from the dining-room windows. In a moment Jane's bicycle was flung into the border, and they were in each other's arms. Clinging together, they got inside the house and, with her back against the door, Jane produced the stolen treasure. Mrs Hinnabel seized and hugged it, scarcely knowing whether to laugh or cry.

'Give it me back,' said Jane firmly and suddenly. 'I've thought on my way home what we've got to do.'

Holding the Bronze, she went for a moment into the dining-room, then marched through the house and through the garden, with her mother following astonished, and paused by the paddock-gate. She gave the whistle that was the special call for Toby, and the old horse, cropping near

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the water, raised his touchingly-willing head and shambled towards them.

'Give him the sugar,' Jane commanded, putting it in her mother's hand. Then into his thick, rough mane she knotted the little figure. 'They might come back to steal it again,' she said, 'and gag and bind us before Father comes. We dare not keep it in the house. Nobody will think of looking for it here.'

'Where are the others?' Mrs Hinnabel asked her.

Jane looked up, remembering them for the first time. 'On the recreation-ground . . . that's where I found them. I don't know . . .'

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The others, by now, had put a good distance between themselves and the recreation-ground. Of the three, Francis was the best runner, but fear lent the thief wings. In formation they crashed across the rough piece of adjoining common, and out beside the Pond. There was no choice but the footpath alongside it, and they pounded on. But two hundred yards ahead was an almost invisible wire fence, separating the public land from a field of cattle. Hokey-Pokey saw it too late. He checked, turned outward and hesitated for a fatal second, facing two charging figures, one brandishing a terrifying prong. He checked again, and with an almighty splash was in the Pond.

If danger is not present, it can be found a comic sight to see a fellow-creature fall, fully clothed, into the water. Francis and Mr Hinnabel found it a comic sight. Hokey-Pokey was not a great swimmer. All the same, he seemed to feel that his only hope was to strike out across the reservoir, which at this point was half-a-mile wide. Watching his frantic struggles Mr Hinnabel stopped laughing.

‘Come on!’ he roared. ‘Come out!’ They stood at the brink stretching their hands to him. ‘It’s all right! It’s all over!’

They hauled him out, a wretched figure, gasping and shivering and utterly without face. Before leaving go, Mr Hinnabel ran his hands over him; but the bronze was not on him; his clothes were plastered to his form without a bulge. They left him on the grass, babbling and sobbing in his own language, clutching spasmodically at his cuffs and trouser-hems to wring them out. Turning for a last look, they saw him, in a fine Southern frenzy, hurl one after another of his wrecked shoes into the Pond.



The four of them finished a glorious breakfast and then Mrs Hinnabel said, ‘Tell us again now, step by step. What happened after you saw Francis?’

Mr Hinnabel told them. ‘But why did he throw it into the shelter?’ Jane asked urgently. ‘How could he be so mad?’

Mr Hinnabel reverently held up the Rod, which still lay across his knees.

‘He didn’t throw it. There are two shelters in the recreation-ground, as you know, one at each end. As I came up, I saw that in the nearer one, on the left, there was a person sitting—a strange old woman—and in a flash I knew what it was all about. She was the old witch who had peered down at me from behind the curtain that afternoon in the little court off Havelock Street . . . the grandmother of Tarrascone, the man who brought me the Bronze. To her it was a magic heirloom, and she didn’t mean to let it go. She had got Nica to steal it back for her. He was the heaven-sent person; he knew me and he knew Askham;

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and she was meeting him here, because they dared not meet at home. I doubled her, with the Rod. Then there was one witch in each shelter. He made for the wrong one, and put the Bronze in her hand, I suppose, and bolted. And the Bronze dropped from the lap that wasn't really there, and fell on to the floor . . . '



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NEXT EVENING, while the Luxtons sat at dinner, Mr Luxton said to his wife as he was helping himself to peas, 'Aren't our eccentric neighbours overdoing it a little, don't you think?'

'Are they?' answered Mrs Luxton shortly. She felt no fondness for her neighbours or their eccentricity at the moment.

'I travelled up with Paul Hinnabel this evening and waited for him to make some excuse about letting us down last night. He didn't mention it, so I said how sorry we'd been not to see them. He knew nothing about it, or at least that was what he declared.'

'Do you mean to say she never told him?'

'So it seems.'

'How amazing! And I asked her to as a special favour. No wonder he appears unsociable if Una sees to it that he never goes out. She absolutely ruined the evening.'

'I'm glad we've got somebody to blame for a ghastly session,' Mr Luxton said.

The little Luxton pitchers stretched their long ears. James was at home for the week. His knee, which he had strained at football last winter, was giving trouble, and as knees were not to be trifled with, he had come home in order to be taken to a London doctor. He and Jos escaped now from

the dining-room as soon as the meal was over. Being without male society, he had to fall back on his sister's company. Between them they chivvied little Lionel up to bed with a great air of knowing what was good for him, and then stood about in the hall.

'I suppose we'd better go over to the Hinnabels', said James at last. 'There's nothing else to do.'

The Hinnabels, attended by Pete, were all lying about in garden chairs, looking unnaturally united and relaxed. There was a table in their midst, with coffee-cups and a compact and aristocratic box of chocolates, bearing the very best Bond Street name. James and Jos seated themselves on the grass.

'Have a chocolate.' Francis held the box out.

'By Jove, these are pretty marvellous.'

'Father bought them,' said Jane, helping herself again. There was something not quite normal about the scene. The Luxtons sat about round coffee-tables after dinner. The Hinnabels were usually to be found all over the place, Mr Hinnabel, having shed his City clothes, gardening purposefully until the very last of the light. They all seemed tonight strangely unpurposeful, and conversation was fitful.

'Your roses are beautiful,' said Jos in her best manner, glancing round the garden.

'I ought to cut off the dead heads,' murmured Mrs Hinnabel, without offering to stir.

'Shall we go for a stroll?' burst out James desperately at last, after ten minutes of this sort of thing.

Francis rolled to his feet.

'Don't be too long,' murmured Mrs Hinnabel again, with half-closed eyes. 'We really ought to go to bed.'

'Are you coming, Jane?' Jos was on her feet with the boys. Jane shook her head.



'Did they say "Going to bed?"' asked James in some amazement when they had moved away from the group. It was half-past eight, and the mid-summer sun was still bright in the sky.

'They were up most of the night.' Francis nodded his head briefly backwards towards his parents, telling part but not all of the truth, since Mr and Mrs Hinnabel had been up the entire night (as well as the preceding night) working feverishly on the cleaning up of the Bronze, for which Mr Hinnabel had originally allowed himself a fortnight, at the end of which forced march he had deposited it thankfully in the Museum safe that morning.

The three strolled across the paddock glistening with buttercups, to the water's edge.

'How's your knee?' asked Francis. 'How long will it keep you at home?'

'About a week, they say.'

'Gosh! How marvellous,' Francis murmured vaguely. James began to wonder if, under the present circumstances, it was. They rounded the hedge that separated the Hinnabels' from the Luxtons' field in silence, and the church clock struck a quarter to nine.

'I really think I ought to go,' said Francis, as it were regaining consciousness. 'See you tomorrow night. Good-bye.' And he was off across the green, leaving them staring at each other.

James switched at the buttercups savagely.

'What a filthy waste of an evening. What is going on over there?' he demanded of Jos.

'I don't know. Jane's been absolutely awful all the week. I thought she'd been having a row with her father or something. Now they're all lolling about eating chocolates together.'

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'He bought them, too. A bag of bull's-eyes is about his usual mark.'

'Mother was absolutely furious about last night,' Jos continued. 'Mrs Hinnabel said they'd love to come, and then simply forgot about the whole thing. And she said Francis was *most* peculiar on the telephone.'

'He was up at quarter to eleven on Saturday night and Mrs Hinnabel was cooking. Last night the parents didn't go to bed at all. And tonight they're all to be in bed at half-past eight. Is there some mad new craze or something? I must say it all looks to me a bit fishy.'

'Really, you know, I believe it all began in the holidays,' said Jos thoughtfully. 'On the last day. Jane was just starting to tell me about it when her mother burst in.'

'What was she starting to tell you?'

'Oh, well . . . you'd think it silly, I expect. It was something to do with magic.'

'Magic, was it? Now I come to think of it, Francis began on that too. I thought it rot, of course, at first. Then I began half to get wind of something. But he shut up.'

'Do you think it could all join on?'

'Goodness knows. What did Jane say to you?'

'She asked me if I believed in it. I thought it was some baby stuff about fairies, but it wasn't. Then her mother came and interrupted us. It was when you were out in the boat.'

James had a sharp flash-back of the *Flying Fish* tilted for baling on a bright windy morning and Francis suddenly dropping a rowlock and plunging into the water over the side.

'Come on.' An instinct made him close the subject. Thoughts were crowding into his head which might or

might not be suitable to communicate to a girl. 'We'd better go in, I suppose.'

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The Rod still hung on its two nails. It was part now of the Hinnabel household; they accepted it, with wonder, with veneration, with love, since it had worked so marvellously for them, with an awed sense of their peculiar good fortune in possessing or entertaining it, and with the knowledge that they must possess it modestly and not try to know too much. It worked. They had made their requests of it and it had answered them, fully and instantly, but according to its own rules and dispensations, into which they must not probe. It worked; but still it had not worked for Jane, and the thought secretly gnawed her, for she felt that she, above all, was the one for whom it should work. It was hers in a special way. Not that she owned it, but she had been present at its beginnings and it had proved itself, had come to life as it were, that afternoon with Pete and the rabbit, for her sake.

It was her turn to use it, and now she was no longer afraid. But what could she use it for? There were many things she wanted, and wanted passionately: a costly, gleaming professional tennis-racquet, which her mother never tired of telling her she was too young to be able to appreciate and use, a pony, a dressing-table of a certain exquisite shape, with rosebud chintz curtains which drew aside to disclose two tiers of perfectly-fitting drawers. Of all these Jane had said to herself a score of times, 'If I could have that, I'd be happy.' And yet, though she never doubted that the Rod would in its own way contrive to give her any one of these things, as it had given the air-gun to Francis, she knew in her bones that this was not the kind of

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thing she would ask it to do. When would her chance come, and how?

On the Thursday evening of that tranquil week, when Mrs Hinnabel was at last clipping off the dead heads of her roses, and Mr Hinnabel, with rhythmic movements, digging the small round bed, and Mrs Maggs, who stayed late on Thursdays, sending forth delicious odours from the kitchen, and when to all concerned the everyday world, without magic, seemed more than good enough, Jane, with Pete at her heels, slipped up into her father's study to hold converse with the Rod. What a small thing it was, and light and fragile. Hanging there, a quiet accustomed object now in an accustomed place, one could hardly believe in the deeds it had performed. Yet it could do them again; here alone had it become accustomed, like a serpent or curious animal tamed and living naturally in the bosom of its own family, but in reality full of strange power. And no power more strange, since this was all there was of it in the world.

She put up her hand and stroked the twin prongs gently, then she lifted the Rod down, to try the points, which were like budding horns, against her palm. In that instant disaster overtook her. Catching the points of the Rod against the cupboard as she lifted it, Jane opened her hand and let it fall on the carpet instantly, for fear that it might crack. Pete was on to it, like a flash. For a second he stood delighted, wagging his tail.

'Drop it, Pete! Drop it!' shrieked Jane, shrill with alarm. At that note he was off like greased lightning, down the stairs, Jane expecting at every bound to hear the Rod splinter against the banisters, and out at the front door.

'Mother! Father! Pete! Stop him!' she screamed, wildly pursuing.

The hunt was on. Terrified but triumphant, Pete tore round the garden, with his owners after him in full cry, avoided them by a hair's breadth among the apple-trees, and, leaping the wire by the paddock gate, with the Rod still miraculously unscathed, made for the open. He raced along by the water, Mr Hinnabel reflecting savagely, as he pounded after him, that man-hunts and dog-hunts were becoming the regular order of his life. Pete passed the hedge that divided the Hinnabel and Luxton gardens, with the three of them yelling in his wake, put the Luxtons' paddock behind him, and was just about to leap into a perfect border of delphiniums, when Mr Luxton and his elder son rushed out of their house and down the gravel path.

'Drop it!' roared Mr Luxton, in a terrible voice, confronting him. Pete dropped it. For a second the five of them stood gazing at each other. Then, panting, Jane picked up the Rod and Mr Hinnabel cuffed Pete with energy. There was nothing to say and he said nothing, but Mrs Hinnabel made an attempt to put some sort of face on it.

'What a hullabaloo!' she gasped. 'I'm so sorry.'

'So glad we stopped him,' acidly replied Mrs Luxton, who had joined the group. 'I thought it must have been Una's new hat at least.'

Looking wonderfully foolish, the Hinnabels withdrew.

'It's all right,' said Jane, when they were out of ear-shot, handing her father the Rod. And she added, before anybody else could do so, 'And that's more than I deserve.'

'They *are* crazy,' said Mrs Luxton, as though it was a relief at last to have the point settled. 'We've tried to give them the benefit of the doubt, but they are.'

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Her son withdrew quietly through the French windows of the drawing-room.

'So that's it,' he said.

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James Luxton had decided on a certain course of action, and he had not taken his sister into his confidence. He had discovered what ailed the Hinnabels, or rather what accounted for the strangeness of their behaviour. They had a secret. They were masters, not of a wonderful lamp, but of a curious dried stick-like object, which was the object at whose existence Francis had hinted. Whatever its uses, they held and must have proved it of utmost value and wished to protect it and preserve it at all costs. What were its uses and powers? It was James's intention to try to discover. He would borrow the thing and try to find out what it could do. He was certain that Francis, after that one first attempt, would never open up on the subject again to him. The object was not something between boys; it was a family thing. He must borrow it unbeknown to the Hinnabels and return it, and, if necessary, borrow it again. He must experiment until he found out how to make it work.

Wild guesses and dreams beset him that night. Last week the Hinnabels had been in trouble; this week they were clearly floating on the calmest of soft seas. How had the object brought that about? Trying to dismiss dreams and conjectures, he turned to the practical point, which was how to get temporary possession of the Rod. For that he must search the Hinnabels' house. Here fortune favoured him; at least to a limited extent. The Hinnabels' house had to be empty for him to search it. He was at home and idle for one week-day longer, while the rest of them had to

stick to their time-tables. Three of the Hinnabels (and Mrs Maggs on Friday afternoon) were accounted for. There remained Mrs Hinnabel, whose movements were irregular. If she were to go out before Jane and Francis came home from school (and he was not without hope that she would, on a fine summer afternoon) that would give him his chance.

Where Francis in these circumstances would have had to rely on feminine assistance, James was more fortunately placed. He had his little brother Lionel, who did what he was told and asked no questions. Lionel was a smaller edition of James himself, dark-haired, said to be good-looking, and by James and Jos considered to be generally spoilt. James did not spoil him, however. He laid hold of him this afternoon soon after Lionel had come home from school, at about four o'clock.

'I've got a job for you, Leo. Come on.'

Requiring no explanations, Leo followed him, and James led him far away from the house, to the kitchen-garden. 'Wait here till I come back. Keep out of sight.'

It was no problem for him to discover whether or not the Hinnabel house was empty. All he had to do was to go and ring at the front door. He sauntered in demurely by the drive and had just lifted his hand to the bell when Mrs Hinnabel came out. She was dressed in a pale frock and looked fresh and quite unmatronly, all in the spirit of this carefree week.

'Hallo, James. How are you? Come in a minute.'

'Oh, no. Don't bother, Mrs Hinnabel. You're just going out. I only came to ask if you thought Francis'd be free to-night.'

'Yes, I expect so, as it's Friday. I rather think he's got Nets after school, though.'

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'Oh, yes. I believe he has.' agreed James with relief.

He accompanied Mrs Hinnabel down the drive and courteously opened the gate for her. Then he made his way quickly home to Leo, waiting in the kitchen garden.

'Come on. Over to the Hinnabels.' There's something I've got to do there. You're to keep *Cave* at the front door. That's all. If any of them come, just call out "James" in an ordinary voice, and I'll come down and say that I was borrowing a book.'

They entered this time by the back way, and Leo, knowing as much as was good for him to know, was posted on the edge of the lawn by the front door.

'Will you be long?'

'I may be. You stay here and keep your eyes skinned.'

James slipped into the house. He knew its geography well, but it was a strange feeling, being alone there with this purpose in view. He felt like a conspirator in a one-man conspiracy. Standing in the hall for a moment, he listened. There was no sound but a thrush calling with piercing sweetness in the garden. Assuring himself, for his own comfort, that he was simply investigating and doing nothing wrong, James quickly mounted the stairs. He would begin in Francis's room, which was familiar ground. He had a hope that he would find what he sought in the open, but a quick glance round the room told him that this was not so. Without any feeling of intrusion he briskly opened all Francis's cupboards and drawers. Francis's possessions were in no such orderly state that his friend's investigations made much difference—they were, in fact, well mixed, the system being to keep such things as he wished to hide safe from his mother's tidying and probably discarding hands. But the Rod was not there.

James shut the wardrobe door. Where next? The

other doors on the landing? What a fool, he thought suddenly. The thing would not be upstairs in bedrooms. Unless they kept it locked up, which was totally unlike the Hinnabels, it would be downstairs, in the cloak-room, or, more likely, in the cellar, where Mr Hinnabel had a carpenter's bench and a rich variety of tools. James searched both these places with thoroughness, which took some time. It was remarkable what the cloak-room and the cellar harboured between them, and passing over such objects as mangles, mousetraps, an old printing-press, a tin bath, and a guitar, his eye ranged purposefully among the sticks, umbrellas, golf-clubs, hockey-sticks and fishing-rods stacked in corners. But still he drew blank. Well, he told himself, it was no use flitting about, he must do the job systematically; and as he was on the ground-floor he would begin there. The Hinnabels', by modern notions, was a rambling house. By the time he had been through the dining-room, sitting-room, kitchen-regions and all that pertained to them, James realised that time must have passed.

It was the turn for Mr Hinnabel's study next. Here James's sense of intrusion, not unmixed with fear, was very great. He had occasionally been in this room, while Mr Hinnabel sat at his desk, transacting his uninteresting mysteries, but to go through a room like this, behind its owner's back, demanded great strength of purpose. James went in gingerly, sniffing the smell of pipe-smoke. Mr Hinnabel's old cupboard faced him, and his spirits rose. He advanced towards it and hopefully opened its great doors. The confusion of objects on the shelves made the conglomeration in the cellar look pale indeed. James looked without daring to touch, then pulled up a chair and felt thoroughly over the shelves that were above his reach, still drawing blank.

Chapter Thirteen

Where, where, where, he asked himself, would such a man put such a thing? He pulled out the drawers of the great desk one by one, though he doubted if they were deep enough to take the length of the Rod; then, with an inspiration, felt carefully behind the books and returned from his slow circuit of the shelves with very dirty but still empty hands. What next? Nothing, that he could see. He strode over to the window-seat and flicked the curtain from its corners impatiently.

Then, turning back into the room, he saw the Rod hanging imperturbably on the cupboard's narrow side. James laughed, in amusement at his wasted efforts, in excitement, triumph and profound relief. He took down the Rod quickly, went out, stood for a moment on the landing and, hearing nothing, ran downstairs, affably preparing to say a word of encouragement to Lionel, whom he had left on duty for so long.

He opened the front door. The sentry was not sleeping at his post, but he lay on the edge of the grass with Francis, the two of them poring over some activity with beetles or with ants. Francis was no enemy, Leo's happy pose declared; he was a god-like being who had dropped down whimsically in the sunshine beside a simple mortal, and had no objection in the world to the mortal's brother borrowing a book.

'Hallo, James.' Francis greeted him, springing up. Then the smile died on his lips. 'What are you doing with that?' he asked in an extraordinary voice.

James, taller and heavier, eyed him steadily.

'Give it to me.'

'Don't get excited. I'm just having a look at it.'

'Give it to me.'

James raised the Rod a little out of Francis's reach.

'Don't get excited, I tell you.' He raised the Rod again. Francis's right hand was on it, holding it down.

'Take your hand off, you fool.'

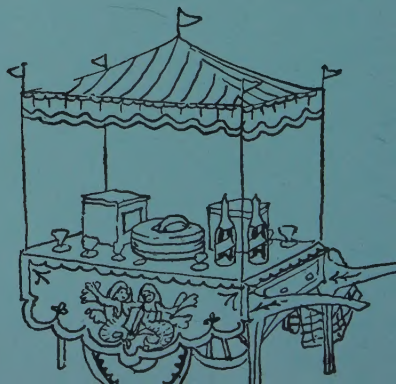
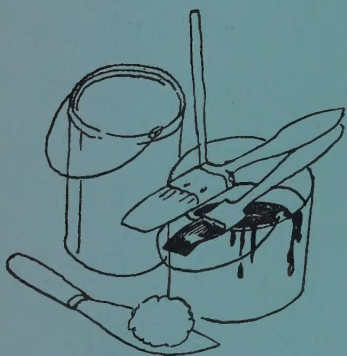
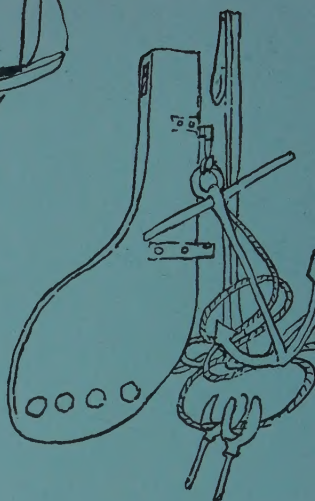
James thrust the Rod upwards and outwards again, and Francis's grip tightened. Passion overpowering reason, they held on, Francis struggling with an awful intensity of desire to have it, not to break it, James struggling with an equal intensity to keep it, not to break it.

The delicate thing snapped in their hands, as, a second too late, each boy let go his hold.

There was a writhing on the grass, then, at their feet, two forked yew branches lay still, red-barked, shrivelled, like a pair of rough wishbones, rather square at the base, witnessing that the Rod in its death-throe had striven to double itself, and grant two desperate but unspoken wishes.

First one, then the other, the young boy Leo picked up and snapped the forked boughs at the joint, and launched the limbs, point first, like darts or assegais, one, two, three, four, to stick in the round bed.

They stood there, leaning drunkenly together, like the remains of a glade stricken by lightning, in the newly-dug earth.



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